

THE SEVEN HOUSES

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THE SEVEN HOUSES

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BY

HAMILTON DRUMMOND,

AUTHOR OF "FOR THE RELIGION," "A MAN OF HIS AGE," ETC.

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TORONTO:
LANGTON AND HALL.

1901.

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54

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THE SEVEN HOUSES

THE HOROSCOPE

I

IN his padded settle by the gaping western hearth of the great hall sat Guy de Lhoeac, Seigneur of that name and Seventh Suzerain in direct succession. For all that it was no more than mid September a birch log had hung flaming on the huge brass dogs since sunset, and from time to time he leant forward, warming himself: since, in spite of its dregs of passions, the blood of old age is chilly. At the fall of the dusk—and in the dimly-lit, cavernous hall of Château Lhoeac, grey and gloomy even in the full of a summer's moon, the dusk fell swiftly—the wenches had brought lights; but the Seigneur had harshly bidden them begone; speaking with less than even his scant courtesy, and then turned back and stared afresh at the red embers.

Five times in his three hours' vigil he had leaped to his feet in a quick impulse of impatience and paced the broad hall up and down with a tread

whose firmness told little of his five-and-seventy years of hard-lived life. Up and down, up and down, his shortened scabbard battering against his left heel as he walked. Each time he crossed the foot of the stairway that opened at the back of the hall he paused, listening. A second or two, no more, he stood with lifted chin and one hand hollowed to help the dullness of hearing, then, as no sound came down the stair-shaft but the common, far-off babble of a great household, his pointed beard sank down upon his breast again, and he went on his restless way; a living shadow amid a hundred wavering silhouettes that leaped, and danced, and postured in the play of the fire. Then his mood would change afresh, or his mind grow weary of the monotonous, solitary tramp. Back he went to his settle, and sighing wearily bent once more over the blaze warming himself, while above him on the groined roof his distorted outline loomed black and vast as King Solomon's imprisoned Genie of the Smoke.

A stern, pathetic face it was that drew its only ruddiness from the glow of the burning wood. Stern in its thin, gaunt cheeks, furrowed deep by the claws of time; its sharp, hooked nose; its fierce eyes, dull at times and heavy with age and sorrow; and yet, in such a man as Guy de Lhoeac the eyes are slow to grow old, for as the thoughts wake to being in the still active brain, they leaped into a fire that matched the sudden spurt of the flame they watched. Stern, too, in its hard-pressed narrow lips,

its square chin showing through the meagre pointed beard ; stern from white hair above to white hair below : that was the face of Guy de Lhoeac at five-and-seventy, and those who knew him said that the face matched the man.

Pathetic, too. Pathetic for its very sternness. Lhoeac was no man to babble of his ambitions and their failure, but every hard line was a story of dumb grief and baffled pride. Pathetic in that no ease and quiet had come to the spirit of which it was the mirror : no, not though the time for shifting the burdens of life to younger shoulders had come and gone. A fierce, a soured, a wearied man, wearied of more than the hour, was Guy de Lhoeac as he sat with his spirit between the living and the dead in the silent flickering darkness of that September night.

At last, and he drew a long breath as he heard it, there came a break in the silence, a footfall on the stone stairway. No lackey's foot nor wench's, but one that, in its firm assuredness, proclaimed its certainty of welcome, and as the noisy echo broke into the Seigneur's reverie he turned himself on the settle and waited, watching the black hollow where lay the last curve of the steps.

But for all that the tread was as firm and arrogant as his own it differed from the Seigneur's in that there was no clank of steel from stair to stair. That he wore no sword meant one of three things—the man was either a servant, a citizen of the humbler

sort, or a churchman, though there were times when even the two former buckled on steel like their betters and five times out of seven a priest was no man of peace. The bold assumption of equality in the tread gave the lie to the two first; neither lackey nor burgher tramped the corridors of Lhoeac in such a fashion! The new-comer, therefore, was an ecclesiastic.

"What news, brother?" cried the Seigneur, rising to meet his fellow-shadow half-way; "is the pother ended? By the Saints! but this coming into the world is a plaguey slow business."

"Well may it be so!" answered the priest, "since afterwards the biding in the world and the leaving of it are both tiresome enough at times. But there is no news save evil news. The girl lies as she has lain these four hours, and the outlook is as dark as your own stairway. Have you a design upon my neck, Guy, that you do not show as much as a rush-light to warn a man from the gaps in the stairs? I stumbled at the turn where there is more slope than flat, and a Lhoeac was like to have gone out of life the same hour that another entered."

"Chut, chut," said the Seigneur impatiently, taking the other by the arm as he spoke. "The wenches troubled me with their fumbling and the dark mated with my mood. Thou fall! I never knew a churchman yet but could feel his way in the dark, and keep his feet however slippery the path. But the other is serious. If they hurt the child, by Saint

Agnes of Lhoeac they shall suffer for it, all three ! both dame, leech, and frocked priest. Tut, what dost thou care for a priest or two ? Let us walk, Henri ; the fever of the march is in my blood to-night. 'Tis tramp, tramp, tramp, with me ; and for all that my journey is so near an end I cannot rest until he who shall come after me is set fairly on his way.

"Think what it means, Henri," he went on, beating the air with his arm as he walked, the other arm crooked in his brother's elbow. "The last Lhoeac mishandled by a drunken midwife ! By Saint Agnes, she should hang, she should certainly hang, and without pity."

"And what of the mishandling of the mother ?"

"The mother, the mother !" he answered. "Oh ! the mother may fend for herself. She is none of Lhoeac's, and no soul here wanted her. But for Raoul's folly in Italy we should have had a stout Guennese to mother the last Lhoeac ; or a damsel of Bearn. Aye, Bearn would have pleased me well : they breed good dams in Bearn. But Italy ! Italy ! I had as lief it had been Spain ! The Saints give me patience with Italy, for I have none of my own ! A pest upon their weakling maidens ! A cold wind withers them. Let the pools go crisp, as they will of a winter's night, and they shiver and grow peakish like a blasted flower. A pest upon Italy, I say ! Let a man philander there an' he will, but let him marry north. 'Tis the reverse of our

proverb : 'Boast of the mountains, but keep thou to the valleys.' Boast of the south if you will, say I, but cleave to the north, and chiefly when it comes to the wenches. Eh, brother, eh, is that not sober truth ? But let that go—what does a priest know of such things ?"

"Yet Raoul loved her ?"

"Loved ? loved ? Say worshipped, man, say worshipped ; and see what came of it in the end. A petty quarrel about the Lord knows what of foolishness, a paltry bickering that healthy, cool, careless blood had minded not a jot, and off he went north to fight King Louis' battles. A man's a fool who is a lover a week after the wedding-day. See what came of it, I say again. The king's battles, no less. Aye, and he fought them well. That was ever a trick of Lhoeac. There at Guinegate he rode a short pike's length behind Crevecœur, when they scattered the Austrian Archduke's cavalry like chaff in a north wind ! Not a scratch came of it. Henri, had he died then I could have given God thanks that Lhoeac upheld the fame of Lhoeac even to the death. That, too, was ever a trick of Lhoeac. But no, but no, he came through the mad riot of the hurly-burly without scathe and must needs fall in the Lord knows what petty fray in Angoumois : a wine-house brawl about sour drink if report speaks true, a wine-house brawl, no more, no less. To think of it is like the turning of a dagger in a wound. A fool's quarrel over wine-dregs left Lhoeac sonless,

kinless, and without a living branch ; for you, brother, being a priest, are already as good as dead. Then comes young Madame with her tale of an heir to Lhoeac, and here are we this night left hanging these hours on the will of a wench whether the stout old line shall live or die."

"And yet, in this hour of her trial, when they send for us presently, brother, you will speak softly to her ? She has been in heavy grief for Raoul, poor soul, and the suffering has worn the spirit's veil of flesh to a shadow."

"And have I not sorrowed ?"

"Yes, yes," and the priest drew the other's arm closer to him. "But the young suffer more than the old, and——"

"And they forget sooner, and so the balance swings even," broke in de Lhoeac roughly. "In three years she will be all eyes and blushes for the first man that prates sweet folly ; while I—— But what is the girl to you that you make so many excuses for her all of a sudden ? While Raoul was here you sang a different note. Ha ! by the Lord ! I see, I see. Thou hast thirty years the better of me in age, and by way of being the wench's friend wouldst put thy hand on Lhoeac that his reverence the Canon of Mont-de-Mersan may build a road to a bishop's seat, aye, or even a cardinal's, for thou hast the ambition of the devil. My wit is not so grey but that it feels thy aspirations under thy smoothness as one does the claws of a cat in the fur

of her soft paws. Well," he went on, as the other made no answer save a swift upward glance in the dark, "I blame no man who climbs, if he but climb honestly and with clean hands. Only, look you," and stopping in his march he swung the other facing him, "look you, Henri, if aught happen the boy through you, then may a curse light upon you, though you be priest, bishop, cardinal, and brother in one."

"What should happen to him?" answered the other drily; "cross no bridges, my dear lord, until you come to them."

"Aye," and with a sigh de Lhoeac turned again across the room, "but when the time of bridges comes I shall be at rest with the Lhoeacs of long ago—pray God I be at rest—and thou wilt be left."

"Be sure," said the priest earnestly, "that Lhoeac shall suffer no loss, no waste, no diminishing, through me."

"Lhoeac? no, because thou wilt be Lhoeac, and so may be trusted to see to thine own safe keeping and aggrandisement. Trust you for that. That is another of thy crooked sayings, and has a double edge. Be that as it may, I call God to witness that the curse stands."

The great log upon the hearth had slowly charred through to the very centre and fallen in, and the short outburst of flames which followed the crash had sunk into a red and sullen glow. The shadows

no longer capered and swung upon roof, pillar, and arras, but grew denser and blacker in their set places as the white film of ash cooled across the hot face of the embers. The soundless life which had haunted the great hall had sobered into stillness, and the only shadows which moved were the two grey figures that walked the time-worn flags in silence.

The old Lord of Lhoeac—a baron of seven generations and of the creation of Saint Louis himself—was the taller of the two by a full head: nor were the brothers alike in a single point save those of stern eyes, hooked nose, and strong square chin. Each in his own way was a hard man, but with this difference: pride of race and love of the Seigneurie over which he reigned ruled and spurred the elder, while Henri, Canon of Mont-de-Mersan, was bondsman to greed of place and power: his pride rather that which he would be than what he was.

"Let there be no talk of curse between us two," said he, breaking the silence at last, and laying a firm white hand upon the other's shoulder. "I would there were ten Lhoeacs instead of this one frail life which seems so loth to come into the world that a man might say it had some foreknowledge of its sorrows. What shall be its name, Guy? But I suppose the mother may have something to say to that!"

"The mother? Oh! the mother? By my faith! I think I see the mother setting her will

against mine. The child is Lhoeac's, and Lhoeac shall name its own as it pleases, though all the demoiselles in Italy said no ! We shall follow the ancient custom. For nine generations it has been thus with us : Guy, son to Raoul, son to Guy, son to Raoul, and so downward. The child follows his grandsire, and so the thing is settled ; his name shall be Guy."

"But, my dear lord, though the mother be silent, nature may have a word to say. It may be a girl, and so——"

"Peste ! Plague take your may-be's and your girls too. A girl ? A girl ? Then let the mother name the baggage, an' welcome ; but God send us no wenches. But for the heir that is coming there is already one wench too many in Lhoeac ! A girl ! Here I vow to Saint Agnes of Lhoeac three silver candlesticks if only——"

"You may spare your vows, my lord and brother," said the priest ; "the event is past praying for ; and all be not right you may take the word of the church that not even three silver candlesticks, no, nor three Saint Agneses either, will work the miracle. But," and he turned towards the hollow of the stairway, "I will wager these same three—the candlesticks, not the saints—that—aye, hearken : the old dame has found her legs as she has never found them these ten years past."

Along the corridor above could be heard the quick patter of running feet not too softly shod ;

no light tread, but the clumsy footfalls of unaccustomed lumbering haste. Then came the clatter of wooden heels on the stairs, growing slower and slower as the gloom thickened, and finally the rustling fumble of a homespun skirt dragged gropingly along the wall.

"Saints send us safe home," said a wheezy voice in the darkness. "For ten times three crowns I would not—— Lord save us ! what's that ? Is there not so much as a rush-light in all Lhoeac, and on this night of a'l nights when there are ghosts abroad ?"

"It is I, dame, the Seigneur. What news ?"

"The worst," answered she, clinging to the wall and still panting between haste and fear, "the worst, and the truth's the truth whether we like it or no, and so best told. Young Madame——"

"Aye, aye, young Madame can bide. We have waited on her long enough, and 'tis our turn now. What of the child ?"

"There is little bidding for young Madame, poor lamb. For four-and-twenty years have I——"

"Aye, aye, but the child, woman, the child ? Mordieu, wouldst have me shake the news out of you ? What of him ?"

"The child is well enough, Monseigneur, and when it has starved five hours according to rule it will drink its milk like a calf : no fear for the child. God grant young Madame see daylight ; 'tis the priest she needs now ; the leech can do no

more, and I'm thinking the Father who was with her knows more of simples than consolation."

"You hear, Henri, you hear? The boy thrives: he is a true son of Lhoeac, and the old house has caught fresh wind for the race. Oh, God, I thank thee! Saint Agnes, I give thee praise! Henceforth this shall be a day of days, for a man child is sprung from the spent stock of Lhoeac. Here on my knees——"

"A man child?" she broke in quaveringly, and stumbling forward as she spoke; "who said aught of a man child? 'Tis a girl! babe, and the sweetest Guienne has seen this generation! For the Lord's sake, see to the Seigneur! Hold him, reverend Father, hold him! Hulloo! You snails, you sluggards! quick, quick, bring wine I say; bring wine, lest there be two dead in one night! God help us! what have we done that life and death should go so linked? My fault, Father? Oh, aye, 'tis always the woman that's to blame! And yet I said no more than the truth: 'tis the dearest babe in all the Duchy."

II

Into the great hall of Lhoeac there were eight entrances. One the main door opening into the central courtyard—a thing of stern defence, of bolts, bars, locks, and ponderous iron studs, built

to laugh alike at fire or the battering of assault. One the stairway facing it across the broad square with its double row of triple pillars, its benches, tables, and scattering of skin rugs; four more in pairs to right and left sunk deep into the side walls and hung with claret-coloured cloth of Rennes looped with tasselled cords; and two through the scantily-lit corridors which swept round the castle in a horse-shoe from the stairs' foot—corridors dank and close in winter time as with the heavy atmosphere of a vault; a ninth there was in the centre of the floor, where, at a touch of a hidden spring, a great flag swung upon a pivot, but it was rather an exit than an entrance, and its gaping mouth had served the wild justice and the wilder vengeance of more than one lord of Lhoeac.

When the shadow of the eternal sleep darkens a household there is commonly little room for this world's slumber within its doors. So was it that still September night at Lhoeac. The watchfulness and waiting which had their centre in young Madame's dim and silent chamber spread their influence from Seigneur to scullion, and no soul lay down to sleep. Then, as always, the awesomeness of the great change made for wakefulness.

Four hours had passed since the bitter blow dealt to de Lhoeac's confident expectation had staggered him body and mind, and the two brothers had betaken themselves to the Seigneur's smaller justice hall, an apartment facing the courtyard and entered

from the left corridor. There, when the frailer elder had recovered himself, they were joined by one who had for some time called himself Messire Jacopo Ravelli, but who, by his own showing, had in his day borne many names.

A striking figure was Messire Jacopo, one at whom a man having looked carelessly once, looked again and yet again, baffled and curious, looked until the furtive glance became a stare, and with every second the questionings would grow as to what manner of mind it was that lay behind that smooth, impassive mask. Then, let the fascination be broken, and Messire Jacopo was no more than one of a common score, save for the waxen whiteness of a face that was the face of the dead rather than the quick.

A slender, hard-knit, sinewy man was Jacopo Ravelli, broad-shouldered, clean-limbed, with hands and feet small-boned, long and lean ; manhood and youth met in him at their strongest. His black, straight hair hung across his ears almost to his shoulders, and being cut square upon the forehead, set the smooth and pallid face as in a dull frame of ebony. His chin was as square as de Lhoeac's own, his lips as firm, but never, even in the fire of his hot youth—and Guy de Lhoeac had lived hard and known hot passions—had the Seigneur's eyes lit up as did those of Messire Jacopo. As to his dress, it was plain to severeness, but a light sword hung at his left hip, and the man had the alert air and

free carriage of one who could use a blade at times, and have no fear that his foe would shame him.

"Sit you down, Henri," the Seigneur had said while the two were still alone, "and set that sconce at your back, for this Ravelli is no common man, and is worth the watching. Why he is here at a time when strangers have scant welcome falls out thus: In '64 it was my fortune to do young Pietro della Rovere—nephew to that Francis of Savona who is now Pope and calls himself Sixtus the Fourth—some little kindness. A nothing, a nothing: no more than soldier to soldier; but the lad, being only a lad, was grateful, and even as a man has not forgotten. Therefore, when I wrote him—or rather Hugo, my chaplain—for, thank the Lord, I know no more of clerk's work than my name, and love better my dagger-manual—when I wrote him, I say, of the evil that had befallen Lhoeac, and the gossamer upon which its promise hung, he must needs send me this Ravelli and a letter that was Rovere's own self for blunt frankness. 'Thou art old,' said he, 'and being old, had best know the good and be warned of the evil that will befall the child through the stars in their courses. Trust Ravelli as thou wouldst myself.' That was four months ago, and to-day—or was it yesterday? for it must be hard upon midnight—at the very prick of noon comes the man himself. What dost thou make of that, brother? Four months of a

blank, and then to come at the tick of time ! To me it smells of the fiend."

"The stars in their courses !" cried Henri de Lhoeac, crossing the room to where on an oaken buffet stood an array of flagons, and pouring out a goblet of wine with a hand that shook in spite of his self-control. "A charlatan ! a cheat ! What hath a Christian man to do with black magic ?"

But the Seigneur shook his head.

"No charlatan, no cheat. What ? are the della Roveres fools ? and would his Holiness join hands with the devil ? That were a pretty scandal ! For, trust me, this Jacopo Ravelli is linked to Sixtus himself, and closely. More than that. When a man is in straits, as I am, he must needs take what help comes to his hand and not question its whence or its wherefore too nicely. What, man ? Wouldst thou not clutch a bishopric, aye, and with both hands ! even though it was the devil's claw that hooked it to thee ? Thou knowest thou wouldst, and never boggle at it ! And when was Lhoeac sharper pressed than now ? With nought but a girl babe and an outworn grandsire between it and ruin !"

"And do I," demanded the other, setting down his cup which he had filled twice, and returning to his place by the hearth, "do I count for nothing ?"

"By your leave, or without your leave," replied the Seigneur, looking across moodily at the priest, "you are, as I told you, as good as dead, and there

are times when a man fears the dead more than he fears the living. For, look you, you know the length of the arm of the one; but who can forecast the power of the other? Let this Italian's message but guide me for the guiding of Lhoeac and I shall thank him whether it comes of the blackest magic that ever dripped sulphur, or is the very inspiration of heaven."

With that Jacopo Ravelli had joined them, bearing himself with that mingling of courtesy and assurance which alone come of long rubbing shoulders with the great upon equal terms.

"It is four months," began de Lhoeac sternly, "since the Marchese Pietro wrote me of your coming."

"To be too soon is not to be in time," replied Ravelli. "To-night I am required, and to-night I am here."

"Aye, aye; but what if——"

"If! if!" he broke in. "Oh, believe me, Monsieur, I am not here to bandy ifs. There are no ifs to the man who knows."

"Then since thou knowest so much," said the priest sharply and eyeing the Italian with profound disfavour, "doubtless thou also knowest why thou art here?"

"Doubtless. The reason is this: there is a child born, and the Baron de Lhoeac would have the stars read."

"That della Rovere told thee?"

"You asked me, Monsieur le Canon de Mont-de-Marsan, and I have answered."

"And can you do this?" cried the Seigneur eagerly, and motioning his brother to be silent.

"I can read a little of what God Almighty writes," replied Ravelli soberly, and with no note of pride in his voice, but rather a gentle humility, "a little, a very little—a word here and there, no more; and the book is great, as needs must that it be great with such an Author."

"So!" said the priest, smiling contemptuously. "Thou art a prophet?"

But the other shook his head.

"No prophet, but a groping translator of God's eternal truth. You read the clouds, the winds, and say, thus and thus it shall be to-morrow. I probe deeper into the heart of the mysteries: that is all. Give me my instructions, Seigneur, that I may do that for which I came, and return to him that sent me."

"Why? What haste is there, man?"

"There is the world's work to be done, and he who bears not his own share of the burden at the time and in the place where the burden should be borne shifts it to another's shoulders; or worse, it is left undone for need of him, and the generation suffers."

"By Saint Agnes! a second providence!" cried the priest, beating his hands together softly. "The world's work, i' faith! Dost thou bear up the pillars of the universe?"

"To every one his share," answered the Italian

quietly ; "and woe to the man, aye, and to the church too, that offers no shoulder to the burden."

"What ? Sir Wizard, the church ? the church ? Art thou ribald ?"

"Hold thy peace, Henri," broke in the Seigneur authoritatively, "and do you, Messire Ravelli, attend to the work in hand. Give me instructions you said a moment since : how can we instruct you who are here to instruct us ?"

"To each workman his tools," replied Ravelli. "In my long-vanished but unforgotten Egyptian days we sought to compel the men of Goshen to make bricks without straw, and evil came of it. But we learn wisdom from our failures."

"Egyptian !" echoed Henri de Lhoeac ; "art thou of Egypt, then ?"

"Once," replied the other curtly, "but that was long ago. Tell me, Seigneur, the hour, the second of the child's birth. That is the seed from which grows the tree of knowledge."

"And hast thou, perchance," said Henri de Lhoeac sarcastically, "the tree of life also ready to thy hand ?"

"It is an offshoot from the roots of knowledge," answered Ravelli, eyeing the priest coldly, "and I who have eaten of the fruit of both know that it is the least blest of the two. But my answer, Seigneur ?"

"That you must ask dame Therese, Messire ; I shall have her called."

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"No, no, no ; by your leave, Seigneur, I will find her out myself. I fear that between life and death the dame is sore bestead to-night, and it would be a sour kindness to give her old bones an added labour."

"What ?" said the priest, his hard mouth curling to a sneer. "So learned, and yet so sympathetic !"

"Being old myself, Sir Canon, I feel for the aged."

"Thou old ? Why, man, thou art younger than I, and I count myself but in my prime."

"I reckon by thought, sorrow, labours, you by——, and yet, and yet," and Jacopo Ravelli's eyes glowed beneath the heavy thatch of his brows, "my years are no mean number, Monsieur le Canon de Mont-de-Mersan. Give me till midnight, Seigneur, then I shall tell my message and begone."

While the Astrologer's footsteps echoed down the empty passage-way the brothers stood in silence, one on either side of the smouldering fire. It was the younger who broke the stillness.

"Did I not say he was a charlatan and a cheat ?" he cried, striking with his open hand the edge of the mantel by which he stood. "I marvel, Guy, that you had patience with the fellow's cheap solemnities and quackish parade of learning. Egypt forsooth and men of Goshen ! Now who, in the name of sense, were the men of Goshen ? Such talk is the market patter of the mountebank."

"Patience was at least no fault of thine, Henri ;

no, nor courtesy either. That one of us should bait him was enough. Besides, he is vouched for by della Rovere, and I hold him honest."

"Honest? A specious, cunning rogue, say I; and if I know less of camps than thou, brother, I know more of men. 'Tis not in the jostle of arms that one learns men. No, it is in the city street, the cunning of the mart, aye, even in the cloister, that such a book is best read. I will wager that he revenges my sifting of his pretensions by setting thee against me."

"He is vouched for by della Rovere," repeated the Seigneur, "and for the present I trust him. Gibe as thou wilt, I can tell a cheat as soon as thou."

That had been four hours before, and thenceforward there had been little talk between the brothers. Yet, for all that, the time had not hung heavily. It is a mistake to think that joy alone can spur the hours. Let a man's thought be but bitter enough and time flies as on wings of light; and, verily, both had their sorrows to nurse—the Seigneur that his hopes were doomed, hopes that in his aged optimism he had fed and nourished until they had grown to stout certainties. Now, being a man of action and wit, and not given to biting his own fingers, needs must that he seek to build his house anew out of its broken fragments. Henri de Lhoeac had a different, and yet no less weighty cause of disquietude. A churchman by

ambition, and caring little for either faith or creed, his ignorance held Jacopo Ravelli in uneasy dread. His vocation was his ladder, and since Raoul's death he had looked to Lhoeac to help him in his climbing. What if this mystic was no charlatan, but a man infinitely wiser than himself, and one who could indeed read with clear eyes the book of men's lives and so lay bare thoughts and purposes he had never yet dared set naked even before his own soul? There, truly, was food for thought, and so Henri de Lhoeac sat staring at the fire, his brows knit and his eyes seeing nothing of the embers whitening before them.

III

It was Jacopo Ravelli who broke in upon their thoughts. As his approaching footsteps rung along the corridor the brothers started, and their eyes met with the one distrustful questioning in both, but neither spoke until the Astrologer had silently let the curtain fall behind him. In his hand he carried a small square of parchment.

"Well?" cried the Seigneur, rising stiffly to his feet and passing a shaking hand across his mouth and beard. "Is it good or evil?"

"Is there a life without both?" replied the Italian. "I mean no offence, Seigneur, but even the house of Lhoeac must share the common lot."

"A truce to platitudes," struck in the Canon. "Della Rovere did not send thee all these leagues to talk hornbook. What the Seigneur de Lhoeac means—and thou knowest it—is, is the child in danger?"

"The answer is there," replied Ravelli, laying the parchment on the table which filled the centre of the room.

"Here?" said the Seigneur, lifting it impatiently and twisting it from side to side as he bent over it. "Why, this—this is nought but hieroglyphics. 'Tis liker a plan in fortifications than aught else. Here we have what might be the fort, a central parallelogram with angles, bastions, demilunes, and the Lord knows what else abutting on its sides. Do you play with us, Messire Ravelli? God's life! man, not even Rovere himself should save your skin from such an ill-timed jest!"

"'Tis the tool of the workman, my lord; or, to use your own word, which is apposite enough, a plan; but a plan of the fort of life besieged and defended. By your leave, Seigneur."

Taking the parchment into his own hands, Ravelli spread it upon the table and laid his finger on the triangle to the left of the central figure.

"Follow now what I say, and believe me I will waste no words. This is the house of the Ascendant; in the child's case 'tis the sign Virgo ruled by Mercury, and its lord is posited in the third decanate. Mars is in conjunction in the same house, and the promise is good. Here," and he

moved his finger downwards, "is Venus but newly entered into the second house, and in trine to the sun and moon in the sixth and tenth, and again the promise is good. The cadent, or third house, and the two that follow," and his finger swept to the right until it halted at the corresponding angle of the parallelogram, "are void; but here, in a house of the descendant, that of the feeble Aquarius, and therefore in his own detriment, is the sun. Saturn is in opposition, and the promise is evil."

Again his finger moved, skirting the side of the parallelogram. This time the motion was upward till it passed the upper right-hand angle, and turning to the left halted in the triangle that crowned the figure. "The tenth house *Medium Cali*: Mid-heaven. It is the day house of Mercury, and in it is the moon in trine to Venus and the sun; the promise is good. Next," and his finger moved to the left, crossing the line that separated the triangles, "is the eleventh house, and in it Cancer, a malevolent sign, and throned there is Jupiter, a gracious planet that in part corrects the evil. Now," and he drew his hand downwards to the left, "we come to the twelfth and last house. It bears the sign of Leo, and in it is Saturn; the promise is evil, and the evil is strengthened by the sun in opposition. These, Seigneur, are the teachings of the stars, and for good or for evil they are written across the heavens."

Straightening himself, Jacopo Ravelli stepped back a pace or two from the table, while in his turn the younger Lhoeac snatched up the parchment and scanned the tracings closely.

"Did I not say it? A mountebank's jargon, a strolling cheapjack's easy patter," he cried; "a bushel of words without so much as even a grain of sense. Pay the fellow his fee, my lord, and let him carry his pretensions to whose ver will swallow them: here they stick in the throat."

But the Seigneur shook his head.

"Thy heat is ill-timed and ill-judged," he said slowly. "To me monkish Latin as they gabble it at the Mass is so much gibberish, yet God Almighty hears and understands the church's prayers, or else what becomes of us? If I reviled Fra Hugo as a fool for his praying, the folly would be mine, not his. Wait, Henri; this, too, may have a meaning for all its disjointed patter of signs and planets and houses and the Lord knows what all. Is it not so, Messire?"

"Three nations have perished in the making of the wisdom," replied the Italian, returning to his place by the table. "Monsieur le Canon de Mont-de-Mersan were a wise man indeed if in the fillip of a finger and thumb he had plumbed the laborious and slow-built learning of Chaldea, Assyria, and Egypt."

"Translate, then, Messire," and taking the parchment from his brother's grasp, the Seigneur handed

it to Ravelli. "Della Rovere bade me trust you as I would himself, and trust him I would to the death. Trust begets truth in a true man, Signor Ravelli; you understand?"

"Trust begets truth," returned Ravelli gravely laying the horoscope once more flat upon the table. "And what della Rovere set his pledge to I will redeem. Listen, then:

"The ascending sign in the House of Life is that of Virgo; the child, therefore, will be chaste, hopeful, strong in fortitude under difficulties. To these qualities the ruler of the house in the third decanate adds shrewdness; while the sun in Aquarius assures that intuition which is a sure judge of men and women. In this first house is also the fiery Mars, but over all his harassments and stress of war will be spread coolness and foresight. Mars is a sword to smite, but his edge is blunted. That, Seigneur, is the lesson of the House of Life.

"Turn now to the second house," and Ravelli's finger travelled downwards as at the first. "This is the last ascending house, and is the House of Wealth. The foundations of the child's fortunes are laid and protected by Venus, the sun, and the moon; that is to say, by love, power, and thought. These are in trine or equal-sided triangle, which, being the form of the pyramid, is the symbol of eternal strength. Happy the life that is so buttressed. The third house, which is that of Brethren; the fourth, of Kindred; and the fifth, of Children, are negative.

That these, Seigneur, are without promise of good is itself a menace, since to lack the love, service, and watchfulness of these is an unspeakable weakness. When the Lord God spread His teachings in the heavens He gave men wit to read them, and the silence of God is an awful and portentous thing; and let those who have the care of the child heed well the warning.

"Now," and his finger rested to the right, and below the angle of the central figure, "come we to Aquarius, which is the sign in the sixth house, being the second house of the descendant. Here, also, is the sun, the symbol of strength and power; his rays quenched, and with yet two more houses of the descendant to pass through. There is danger, Seigneur, danger imminent and great. But this is the House of Health, and with the power of the sun within it there is no fear for the child upon this score. The danger is from without, not from within, and the key lies in this—the houses of Brethren, Religion, and Enemies are in square, and the square is as evil as the trine is good. Next lies the House of Marriage, where night and day meeting merge in one. It is void of direct teaching, but has Mars and Mercury in opposition. There will, therefore, at this time of life, be an adverse and evil union of cunning and strength, mind and force, power without scruple. In its evil aspect Mercury is the very father of lies.

"The eight and ninth houses are also void : the

one is the House of Death, with the planet of woman's love at its coldest, so that the shadow of loss falls near, very near, the babe. The other is the House of Religion, and of it there is this to be said: Saturn in the twelfth house and the sun in the sixth are in square, and the aspect is threatening: a baleful conjunction of the forces of two worlds. Let the child," and Ravelli looked up for an instant full in the face of Henri de Lhoeac, "let the child, I say, beware of the power of the church."

It was but a glance, no more; then he turned back impassively to the diagram, putting his finger on the tenth house, which he had called Mid-heaven.

"The House of Dignity and Honour: it is occupied by the sign Gemini, and in it is the moon. The planet is in her growth, and if but the dangers of the third, fourth, seventh, and ninth houses be escaped, the child will come to honour through strength and love, which are in trine. Last but one is the House of Friends, and in it is the planet of beneficent power. It is the first ascending house, and when the time of trial comes its influence will be potent, counteracting," and he laid his finger on the triangle to the left of the upper corner of the figure, "the malevolency of Saturn throned in the House of Enemies—a malevolency unscrupulous and implacable. To sum up all, Seigneur. Grave this upon your memory and teach it to all those who truly love the fortunes of Lhoeac and the life of the young child.

When priest or kin hath aught to win,
Then trust thou least both kin and priest.

There, in a word, is the message of the stars."

Jacopo Ravelli had spoken throughout in the level, measured tone of a man whose brain is intent upon the unfolding of a problem, and who, because of the concentrations which it demands, has a mind vacant to all else. There had been neither hesitation nor passion; simply the cold statement of comprehending knowledge. These things were so because they were so, and there was no room for question, heat, pause, or deviation. Then, having finished, he bowed to the Seigneur, pushed the parchment from him as if to say, "It is done with," and stepped back as he had done at the first.

But before Guy de Lhoeac could open his mouth the priest broke in, hot and furious—

"By Saint A. did I not say so? How much hath this Rove. J thee, fellow, to villify Holy Church? What a cur the man must be to bid thee foul and snap at that whereby he lives, since but for Sixtus where would be Rovere? Ha! I smell the trick. These Roveres are of the Italian faction, and would discredit us common scum of France lest we climb into their place! By Holy Paul! he and thou shall pay for it. What, Guy, what? Art thou dumb under such vile slanders of thy brother?"

But the Seigneur never budged from where he stood leaning against the table, his arms crossed, and his beard sunk upon his breast.

"The child hath other kin besides thee—kin on the mother's side," he answered coldly, "and it is to Messire Ravelli's credit that he has told his message without fear or favour. Why art thou so hot to take it to thyself? But this thing is new to me, and my wit is slower than it was. Signor, let me understand. You say there are twelve houses?"

"That is the modern method, Seigneur, the fangle of these few hundred years," replied the Italian, "and so I gave it to you. But it was not thus we learned astrology on the ancient watch-towers of Nineveh and Babylon. No, Judea knew the truth more simply and yet more perfectly, and yet in their essence the systems are at one. It is the accursed hunger after novelty and elaboration. What need of twelve houses when there are but seven dwellers therein? Since what are they, these houses, but the changing abodes where the Eternal forces move and rule? And which is greater, the body of a man or the eternal spirit that illumines it? the house or that which dignifies the house? Truly, the latter. Thence come the pulsations of the heart of the universe, the flooding currents of life in which are borne the powers and destinies of men. Reckon them, then, Seigneur, as seven houses. Thus: the House of Life and Fortune, the things which a man possesses; the House of Kindred, that environment into which a man is born; the House of Marriage, which is the house of the being and the blessing of life; the House of Death; the House of Religion;

the House of Dignity and Honour ; the House of Friends and Enemies. You are warned ; you are taught, Seigneur. May the Power that through the creeping centuries has shed this broadening light upon the world keep and guard the child."

Turning on his heel, Jacopo Ravelli lifted the curtain behind him and was gone with no more than the faintest gesture of farewell. Henri de Lhoeac he heeded not at all.

So sudden was the movement that the curtain had fallen back into its place before the Seigneur recovered from his surprise, and as he sprang forward to recall the Italian he found his purpose checked. Face to face with him in the hollow of the wall was dame Therese, panting and breathless.

"For the love of the Lord, Seigneurs both, come to young Madame and at once. The night is 'most gone, and it's on my mind that when it goes she'll go with it."

"Chut, chut, dame," answered de Lhoeac as he followed her into the passage. "White was ever black with you if it had even so much as a vein of grey in it. Give her the child to pet, and I'll warrant the babe will cuddle her back to strength."

"The babe, Seigneur ? Ah, but it's woeful to see her with it asleep on her arm. 'Tis life and death they are, these two ; and not a handsbreadth between. A dozen times have I tried to take it from her, that she might rest, but she will not, she will not. 'Let it 'hide,' says she, mumbling it with her

mouth, 'let it bide. I shall have her but five hours, the world ten times as many years. Nay, it may be longer than that ere I kiss her again ; let it bide, dame dear.' And what can a body do but give her her way and strive hard not to weep ?"

"Thou art a fool, woman, a fool," said the Seigneur angrily. "What ? Give the girl her way for no reason but that she whines for it ? I thought thou hadst more sense, and thou past middle age ; but some would live to a hundred and never learn. Plague take these stairs ! they grow steeper every day ; and yet there was a time when I could do four in a stride. Would to God I could see young feet clamber up them. Stay a moment, dame, while I breathe ; nay, rather go on and bid young Madame put some colour in her cheeks if only for shame that she has brought no son to Lhoeac."

Dame Therese had gone on her way as de Lhoeac bade her, but at his last words she turned upon him, her smooth, plump face wrinkled with anger and her eyes ablaze.

"What ?" she cried in a hoarse whisper, that hissed along the passage like water on hot iron ; "would you gall her with that, and she in her last hour ? To your face I tell it to you, Seigneur, and come what may of the telling : you were ever a hard man, and you grow no softer with age, but if you fling that in her face, and she with the shadow of the grave upon her, it will be an ill thing to answer for and you so old as to be no more than an arms-

length from your own end. Nay, more," and she fronted Guy de Lhoeac as no man had ever fronted him save with a naked weapon in his hand, and few even then, "if that be your thought, it were better you bide outside, and not carry your own hot curse with you for the tags of your days."

Round she swung on her heel again, and with back squared and chin in the air went down the corridor muttering, while the startled Seigneur could do no more than stand leaning upon the stone balustrade, staring.

"Plague take the beldame!" he said between his teeth. "Didst thou hear her, Henri? For half a word she would have had her nails in my cheeks." But to his credit be it said that neither then nor later did dame Therese suffer so much as a rebuke for her honest speech. Whether in man or in woman Guy de Lhoeac respected honesty and courage.

When they entered the room Therese was already bending above the bed, and as the Seigneur leaned across her shoulder his greeting of a rough jest died unspoken. Too familiar with death in its many forms to have any illusions, his first words gave the key to his thoughts.

"Where is Fra Hugo," he asked bluntly.

"My peace is made, Seigneur. Fra Hugo has come and gone."

"Thy peace, poor lamb," said the nurse, sobbing and pushing back the hair from the girl's forehead

with a hand that shook for all its sinewy strength ;
“ When was there aught but peace between God and
the ? I’ll warrant ’twas such a white confession as
Fia Hugo never before hearkened to.”

“ Henceforth that place is mine, dame ;” and with
gentle strength the Seigneur moved the weeping
woman aside, setting himself in her stead by the
bed-head.

With a quick flash of life the girl looked up, and
the fingers that caught his sleeve had a strange
strength for one so near the edge of the world.

“ Shall it be so, my lord, shall it indeed be so ?
Henceforth ; and for the child too ? See !” and
she drew down the coverings, showing the infant
asleep upon her arm. “ Is that yours henceforth,
Seigneur ? ”

“ While God gives me life she shall be the
treasure of Lhoeac !” he replied solemnly, laying
his hand on the babe’s head as he spoke. “ Nay,
more ; by His grace I shall find a way to stretch an
arm from the grave itself to hold her safe. God in
His mercy deal so with me as I deal with the
child.”

“ And at the last may He be gracious to you, my
lord, as you have now had pity upon me. My fear
was for the child. The rest is nothing—nothing
but a sleeping and awakening.”

“ What, *ma petite* ? These seventy-five years it
has seemed to me hard to die ; is it not so at the
last ? ”

"This," and a smile flickered upon her lips as she lay back with closed eyes, "this is easy, so very easy."

Then she wrapped her arms closer about the child and a silence fell upon the room, broken only by the drumming of Henri de Lhoeac's fingers on the bed-foot. But not for long. With a start she looked up.

"Take her, my father, take her," she whispered hoarsely, lifting the child with her last strength as she spoke. "My babe, my babe, my babe!"

Very tenderly de Lhoeac took the infant into his unaccustomed arms.

"She is mine, daughter, mine to hold and guard."

"And to love?"

"And to love," he repeated, drawing the child closer.

"Into Thy hands, oh Lord—thy hands, I——"

Then, from whence none noted, Fra Hugo stole into the room and knelt by the bed-head. The shadow of the House of Death had fallen across the House of Life even as Jacopo Ravelli had foretold.

THE HOUSE OF LIFE

I

FOR eight years of life Guy de Lhoeac kept his word, as was the custom of his race, and then, dying in the fulness and feebleness of years, kept it in death. For these eight years the child Denise—called after her grandmother, the Seigneur's long-dead wife—was the plaything and the idol of the Suzerainty. No Anne of Brittany, whether as Duchess in her own right or as twice Queen of France—and Anne, astute, clear-brained and ambitious, was no puppet Queen—ruled her millions with a more grave assumption of right divine than that with which Denise the child ruled her hundreds, and the humblest of her subjects was stern old Guy de Lhoeac.

It was nature's revenge, and when nature hits back she hits hard. For close upon threescore years he had been a law unto himself, going his own way in ruthless disregard of aught but his own will, yet always within such bounds as every man sets up

who reverences his own conscience. Now, in his old age he was taken captive, and, being for these same restraints of conscience which bound him in his love even as they had in his ambition and his hate, as they bind all loyal gentlemen, had no will but that of the child. His own pride of lineage had taken a fresh form, and Lhoeac, the fate of many generations, was lost in Lhoeac the darling of his prayer and thought.

But it was not for nought that Lhoeac submitted itself to the will of its child tyrant. Never, for two generations, had the Suzerainty known such years of fat and plenty, growth and peace. Hitherto its resources of both men and goods had been steadily, ruthlessly drained that its Seigneur or its Sieur, the old lord or the young, might hold his own in camp and court as became a Lhoeac of Lhoeac. With the death of the young heir in a private quarrel all that had ceased, and now old Guy de Lhoeac's one thought was the adding of strength to strength against the day of trial; so that to Bearn in the south and the furthest verge of Guienne in the north Lhoeac became known as a place where a man might till his fields and plant his vineyards with the assurance of eating the fruit of his labour.

But Guy de Lhoeac in his hard-wrought life had learned this truth amongst others: that strength begets strength, and that preparedness for war is the surest pledge of peace. Therefore, making no haste, but rather biding his time that he might pick and

choose, he gathered together out of every nation such a garrison as held Lhoeac as safe as Louis the King held Plessis Les Tours, but with a difference. The Seigneur ruled through love and faith, the King through fear and hatred ; and of the two the Seigneur was the better served. What man wept when the eleventh Louis, that "walking skeleton," laid himself down to die ? Not one in all France.

After the death of the young mother there had been high words between the brothers, and once only through these eight years did the Canon of Mont-de-Mersan visit the Château, and then it was again under the shadow of loss. Fra Hugo passed away as tranquilly as he had lived, and needs must that a chaplain be found to fill his place.

In this emergency the Seigneur—who was no man to bear malice from one year to another—bethought himself of his brother. What more natural than that the priest of the family should provide the family priest ? Therefore he wrote to Henri de Lhoeac in his canonry of Mont-de-Mersan ordering a chaplain to suit the needs of his household, as a man might a horse or a cow ; and provided he was, in the person of Brother Martin, but not direct from Mont-de-Mersan.

In his fastidious zeal for Lhoeac, Henri could find no man within arms-length to fill the place. What more natural, then, but that in his perplexity he should apply to Torriano, General of the gentle Order of Saint Dominic, a man already famous for

that earnest spirit which afterwards found its highest expression of devotion in the purging of the church from the malignant heresies of Fra Girolamo, commonly known as Savonarola. A fiery and a terrible purging truly, but congenial withal, and Torriano's enthusiasm was not to be limited by weak considerations of justice or mercy.

In the hands of such a man Henri de Lhoeac might leave with safety the needs of his brother's household, and his own interests, and doubtless the six weeks or more during which the Château was without ghostly comfort were not wasted. Brother Martin was worth waiting for. Naturally, too, the young Dominican would require for private teaching these five days he rested at Mont-de-Mersan. To be rightly used spiritual influence must be joined to worldly knowledge, and the Canon was an efficient, if not a deeply learned instructor.

Nor, impelled by his Christian charity, could Henri de Lhoeac neglect this opportunity of reconciliation. He therefore accompanied his protégé, and their discourse by the way was impressive and to the point, being the summing up of a week's teaching. "The church, my brother, the church first and always; then the order; then Lhoeac. Therefore it follows that the good of the church is the advancement of the order and the blessing of Lhoeac. Even to a man who has not learned logic that much must be clear. It is clear, also, that the blessing of the one and the advance-

ment of the other must be by the road of the first. Now Lhoeac, with its revenues of ten thousand crowns a year, is in danger of lapsing to the world by the sinful folly of a dotard, when by lawful right and justice it is the heritage of a son of the church and through him of our common mother."

"Between this justice and this wickedness stands a child of five years; a sinless age, my brother, as the church rightly teaches. Mark that, and keep it in thy memory; a sinless age. If there were guilt upon the soul it would be another matter, but the guilt is yet to come. Truly it is to the glory of God that sin should not befoul a soul; and when the glory of God and the good of the church are one the duty of an earnest servant of both is plain. What saith the prophet?—there is no need to give it in the Latin—'Whoso converteth a sinner from the error of his ways shall save a soul from death.'"

"It was the Holy Apostle James, was it not, Father? And is it not rather Greek?"

"Aye, aye, Latin or Greek, 'tis all one; and mark you the 'shall.' 'Tis a thing yet to come to pass, a thing that, so to speak, lies in the womb of time; therefore he wrote as a prophet and not as an apostle. In future, brother, I would have you to be more careful of these subtleties, lest the ribald in the world scoff at us. But the point is 'whoso converteth.' Now, to convert is to transform—to turn; therefore the prevention, or turning of this child from sin—you see the point, and how it is a thing

commanded? Good, aptness in conception is much, but swiftness in action is more."

"Only," and Henri de Lhoeac held up a warning hand as he rode, "there must be no scandal; no cause for the enemy to blaspheme. Think, my brother, ten thousand crowns a year rioted away in Satan only knows what evil indulgences when they might be devoted to the suppression of heresy, or the bringing into the fold of the church the heathen who walk in darkness."

"I understand, Father," and Brother Martin's sombre eyes lit up in their hollows. "This Lhoeac is no better than anathema, having rejected the counsels of truth and justice. That much his Greatness the General has told me. As to the child, the world must move on, and it were better that one die rather than a whole people perish."

"You understand, also," and Henry de Lhoeac's face clouded, and his words came less trippingly to his tongue, "that I cannot appear in this matter? Already the world is over-fond of ascribing evil motives to us churchmen. Now, our motives are pure, but whatsoever happens must happen of the providence of God, or in the course of nature, which is the same thing. Eh, brother; you understand?"

"Torriano was clear," answered Brother Martin gravely. "He is the brain and heart; I am no more than a finger and thumb. It is honour enough to me if I lift out of the church's way that which hinders its progress."

Both were received by the Seigneur in characteristic fashion.

"You are welcome to Lhoeac, Sir Priest; aye, and you, too, brother, in spite of all that has come and gone between us. But I would have you both bear this in mind. Your business is with the world to come and with nought else; leave my affairs alone, and we shall be the better friends. It will rejoice your heart, Henri, to learn that the child is as sturdy as her mother was frail. God be thanked, she is Lhoeac through and through, spirit and temper, bone and flesh."

"And does her mind keep pace with her strength, my lord?" said Brother Martin, striking in quickly before his superior could reply to the blunt greeting. "All my poor store of knowledge is at her——"

"What the body is to-day the mind will be to-morrow," interrupted the Seigneur sharply. "I'll warrant the wit when the time comes to use it. What, man? Wouldst have the babe—and what is five years but a babe?—robbed of her freshness? By Saint Agnes, Master Monk, thou wilt not be long at Lhoeac if thou plaguest the little maid with thy books. Teach her to love truth, to fear nought, and to hate the devil; and ten years hence will be soon enough for the rest. What the pest has a girl to do with books? Aye, or a boy either, if he have not a mitre in his eye! As thou hast, Henri, and with little learning to aid thee!"

Which was true enough. The Canon of Mont-de-

Mersan had his own methods of climbing, but his ladder was not propped against the tree of knowledge.

That Brother Martin took the Seigneur's blunt hint to heart was presently seen in the close friendship which sprang up between the monk and the child Denise. Within a week he held the third place in her love, coming next to the Seigneur and dame Therese. With Henri de Lhoecac she was at frank enmity, and made no scruple of openly expressing her wish that the Castle was quit of him; a wish which externally ruffled the Canon not at all.

"She has been well taught," said he, with a hard smile and a shrug of the shoulders. "But I am a bird of passage, and count for nought. That she should open her heart to Martin is much more to the point, and he is winning her fast; fast; both love and confidence, therefore all is well."

They were on the terrace which fronted the great entrance to the Castle as he spoke; and indeed the monk and the child made a strange couple. The man, tall and ascetic, thin to meagreness in spite of the swathing folds of his grey frock, was braced against the weight of the sturdy, fresh-faced child, who, grasping his loosened waistcords with both hands, swung, swaying back, her long quaint robe brushing the grass and her head tilted to laugh up into the lined and earnest face turned down to greet her.

"Aye," answered the Seigneur, his dull eyes lighting up as they always did at the sight of Denise; "I am in your debt there, Henri. Some day you must show me how to repay you. That Martin of yours is a rare fellow and a treasure worth the keeping."

This was a mood long watched for, and Henri de Lhoeac was no man to let it slip.

"Between brother and brother there is no room for talk of repayment," said he, laying his hand on the other's arm and pressing it lightly. "You are Seigneur, Guy, and I—well, it is written the younger shall serve the elder. Yet, if I but dared say it, there is a thing at the moment that you—but no, it is too much, beyond all reason too much; let there be no talk of repayment, my dear lord and brother, I beg of you."

"Too much?" repeated the Seigneur, still watching the play of the child with smiling eyes. "You have grown modest, Henri, a new thing with you. If it touch not Lhoeac—— Well tugged, Denise, thou hast a boy's strength in those arms of thine! Harder, harder! See how he staggers, Henri, for all that he is a man and she no more than a babe. By Saint Agnes, it is a brave wench! Ah, your pardon. We spoke of something you had in your mind, did we not?"

With a strong effort the Canon of Mont-de-Mersan curbed his wrath; yet, in spite of his control, his voice shook, and though his lips smiled there was

no laughter in his eyes but rather much bitterness as he answered—

"A brave wench, truly ! and her baby's play outweighs the dearest hopes of a man of fifty years. Bid her make Brother Martin stagger a second time, that I may forget my chagrin in my admiration."

"So, so ; I remember now. Does it lie so near your heart as that ? Well, if it touch not Lhoeac, as I said, or if it rob not Raoul's child, who is the heir of Lhoeac, you will not find me backward. But, for the sake of the peace which is between us, let that which is asleep bide asleep."

For a brief space there was silence. To attack on the weakest side is as much the wit of the beggar as of the soldier, and Henri de Lhoeac could afford to throw away no point in his strategy.

"The Bishop of Libourne is dead," he said at last, speaking slowly and with bowed head. "For eight thousand crowns a Lhoeac could be Bishop of Libourne. Thence to Bordeaux is but a step, and—and from Bordeaux to Rome has been but a further step before now. Remember Clement the Fifth. I am no fool, Guy, and for eight thousand crowns a Lhoeac may one day sit on Saint Peter's chair."

"What, Henri ? Simony ?"

"No, no, no. But there are fees to be paid. Does Innocent the Eighth hold state for nothing ? And where is a poor Canon of Mont-de-Mersan to

find eight thousand crowns? Be frank, my lord; is it one year's revenue of Lhoeac?"

"To be frank, it is not; but it is eight thousand crowns, and—"

From behind there came the bubbling laughter of the child, and the Seigneur stopped abruptly, his forehead wrinkled in thought. Then as suddenly as his face had clouded it cleared; his mind was made up, and once his face was set forward he was no man to look back.

"After all it is not overmuch to pay for peace once and for all. But—for I would not willingly be taken for a fool—to be frank again, this wild talk of Saint Peter's chair, and the greatness of Lhoeac moves me not at all. On such a greatness, and so won, I set no manner of store. Thou," and there was a sort of kindly contempt in his tone as he spoke, "thou, Henri, art the first Lhoeac of us all who hast sought to climb by a back stair. But let that pass; thou hast chosen, and that thou wilt climb, and climb high, I doubt not. I would only have thee understand that these things in no wise touch me. But," and his voice softened, and he put his hand lightly on the other's shoulder, "thou wert a babe when I was a grown man, and for all thy wit I cannot but hold thee as a little of the weakling still, and so a thing to be helped. That counts for something. Then thou art of Lhoeac and I love the race, root and branch; that also counts for something. Lastly, there is the child Denise, and

she counts for much, for the other two lumped together, and more. It is Denise, Henri, who gives thee thy eight thousand crowns. Remember it to her for good when the day of her need comes."

With a quick gesture Henri de Lhoeac grasped the Seigneur's hand in both of his.

"My lord ; my brother ; Guy !" he cried, with a rising inflection in his earnest, vibrating voice. "How can I thank thee ? How can I repay thee ?" But the Seigneur shook him off almost impatiently.

"Did I not tell thee that it was Denise and not I ? Remember it to Denise, Henri."

"Have no fear, brother," answered the other softly, "have no fear ; I shall not forget Denise—no, not while I live."

Four days later he returned to Mont-de-Mersan, and ten of Lhoeac's men rode with him. Eight thousand crowns were not to be lightly risked, and the safety of the highways of Gascony and Guienne was little better than a byword.

II

Between Henri de Lhoeac and the humble brother of the Order of Saint Dominic there had been little intercourse during the stay of the former at the Château. He is a wise man who does not say too much even when mind and heart are alike full ; and the future Bishop of Libourne was right

when he described himself as no fool. One parting injunction he gave, and one only.

"There is no virtue in overhaste," said he to the young friar who walked by his stirrup-leather as he rode slowly down the grass slope fronting the terraced and paved causeway which surrounded the Castle. "Speed hath its merits, but to do a thing well counts for more than to do it quickly. See to it that I can commend thee to Torriano;" and with a curt nod he shook up his beast and rode smartly after his bishopric.

The advice was sound, and Brother Martin knew it. Yet, with his zeal ablaze for that great work for the church which Torriano had promised should lie behind the fulfilment of the duty laid upon him at Lhoeac, he chafed sorely at the caution. The dream of his life was a missionary martyrdom, and he reckoned no price too high to pay, no road too hard or too foul to travel, to gain his end. Humble Brother Martin had it in him to be another Peter the Hermit preaching a fresh crusade, and in his pinched, starved face and fiery, sunken eyes he bore the unmistakable signs-royal of the enthusiast.

To such a man a child was no more than a butterfly in the sunshine, and the wise Canon of Mont-de-Mersan struck the true note when he harped upon the sinlessness of Denise. Yet, for all his strictness, Brother Martin was too astute to play the ascetic in such a community as that of Lhoeac. The Seigneur was no man to be won over by stern austerity.

Like most men of camps he was suspicious of extremes, and with the craft of his training Brother Martin let slip into life that true nature of kindly and gentle frankness which for seven years he had held hard curbed. Results justified his wisdom. Not only did he win the child, but within a month all Château Lhoeac had forgotten Fra Hugo in Brother Martin. The new order of things had elbowed out of memory the old.

Yet, in spite of the repose from which the Suzerainty sucked strength, the days were not altogether days of peace to the garrison. Since Talbot had fallen at Castillon some forty years before, the English had gradually ceased to trouble in the land, but their very disappearance, and the peace which followed, had let loose another form of strife, and fostered an internal anarchy by setting free a horde of unscrupulous mercenaries, who, having long lived by robbery in the name of war, now turned to frank brigandage. Every fastness, whether of hill or forest, had its band of marauders, and the very prosperity of Lhoeac made it the richer prey.

It therefore followed that English Roger Patcham, who served as captain under the Seigneur, had his hands full. Not a week passed without its skirmish, and swords and pikes had small chance to grow dull with rust—a thing which pleased Guy de Lhoeac hugely. He had no mind that his fighting tools, whether of steel or flesh and blood, should lose their keenness.

But all these comings and goings were so much a matter of course that they in no wise troubled the daily life of Lhoeac. It remained for the child Denise to ruffle the calm.

It was a mid-July day, and Guy de Lhoeac was seated on a bench in front of the great door warming his cold blood in the sunshine. Hard upon an hour he had sat there, sunning himself, when he was roused by a thin cry from the lower pasture to the left, where the angle of a pine wood just hid Les Rochers-des-Ours from sight; a rough scar of rocks falling rapidly for two hundred feet, and where tradition said the bears of old made their den. In an instant he was alert, and shading his eyes with his hand stared hard across the grass.

"'Tis Pierre le Bossu," he muttered as he rose to his feet. "There is trouble afoot. A man of sense is Pierre, and knows better than to rouse Lhoeac for nought. Hullo! who serves within? Bring me my staff, and quickly." With the stiffness warmed out of his limbs he had thrown off ten years from his age, and for all his haste when the two met Guy the lord panted less hard than Pierre the peasant.

"Well?" he cried sharply, "hath Spain broken loose upon us that thou comest howling in such a fashion?"

"Oh, Seigneur, the maid, the little maid!" gasped the hunchback. "I saw her tumble like a shot goat. With my own eyes I saw it."

"What maid, fool?"

"Mamzelle Denise ; like a shot goat, Seigneur, like a shot goat."

Down fell the staff and out flew Guy de Lhoeac's two hands, and with the words still in his mouth Master Pierre was being shaken as never his great harridan of a wife had shaken him in all their fourteen years of troubled matrimony.

"Mademoiselle Denise ? What tale is this ? Talk, fool, talk."

"For the love of God, Seigneur ! Saints ! My tongue is bitten through, Seigneur. Seigneur, how can I talk and all my breath trounced out of me ?"

"There !" and still unconscious of his own violence, Guy de Lhoeac flung the hunchback from him so that he spun and staggered from heel to heel on the dry sod. "Now talk, fool."

"It was this way, Seigneur," and with an effort Pierre le Bossu pulled himself together and faced the stern old lord. "I was setting my mole-traps——"

"Plague take thy mole-traps ! God in heaven, man, give me a plain answer ! What of Mademoiselle ?"

"She was on the brow of the rocks with the grey friar, Seigneur. There she was, dancing and capering like a goat kid, as a child should, and when I saw her I straightened my back——"

"Thy back, man ! Spur thyself, I say."

"Yes, Seigneur, yes—and waved—so ; but she never saw me, though the monk did, for he answered

me like this. Then I stooped, and when I looked again there was a wisp of blue and white rolling down the rocks, just like a shot goat. So I ran, and——"

But Guy de Lheenc, with one hand pressed hard upon his heart, was running through the fringe of pines which there bordered the grass-lands as he had not run in twenty years. On and on, with his teeth hard set and his eyes seeing little else through the suffused mist that was before them but a blue and white bundle tumbling down a bottomless cascade of rocks, and a sweet, fresh face staring him back from the twinkling mass of colour. A bitter hard race it was, and not far from a race of death to the old Seigneur, yet he won through, and, breathing fast between his clenched teeth, broke from the shadow to the sunshine to see Brother Martin coming to meet him with the wisped bundle of his agonised terror held tenderly in his arms.

"Dead?" he cried shrilly, his voice catching and cracking in his dry throat. "My Denise, my Denise! Oh, God, have mercy upon me!"

Then above the monk's grey sleeve he saw a vision of a scared white face struggle into sight, and a still sturdy voice cried back—

"That's my Granddad, that's my own Granddad. Be good to Denise, Granddad, for she's frightened herself."

Slipping from the priest's hold, she ran to the Seigneur, who, raising her, held her to his breast

with almost fierce passion; nor could Brother Martin, as he stood silently by with moist eyes, have told which of the twain comforted the other the more.

Presently, laying one arm round de Lhoeac's neck, she settled herself in his clasp, and said—

"Carry Denise home, Granddad; Denise is tired."

But reaction had set in, and it was with a pathetic bitterness that de Lhoeac, recognising his own feebleness, replied—

"Granddad is tired, too, Denise. Brother Martin will take thee."

Promptly the child turned to the friar. "Martin is good," she said—then she held up her face that the white-haired mouth might kiss her—"but you are better, Granddad. Martin will carry Denise."

As they went forward, the child having settled herself in his arms with a sigh of comfort, the friar began his story of what had befallen her, but de Lhoeac stopped him at the very outset.

"Take her to dame Therese, and let there be no time lost," he said curtly. "I will follow at my own pace. Later Denise herself shall tell me what has happened."

But as he saw the child's hand go up and pat the monk's cheek and heard her crooning to herself in his arms, a foreboding that had been half-stirred within him was laid to rest. Her faith and love were unchanged, therefore Brother Martin could have had no hand in the accident.

As it chanced, he had the end of the story told first, for as he went slowly through the wood he met one of the hunchback's fellow-peasants, and from him learned how the Dominican had risked his own life for that of young Mamzelle.

"Down he clambered, Seigneur, more like a cat than a man. My faith! how he swung himself from rock to rock when a slip was death, and that grey skirt of his flapping his legs like petticoats on a windy day! Doubtless the blessed saint upheld him, but it is none the less a fearsome thing for a man to have nought but his faith betwixt him and a hundred feet of nothing and the next world. Yet he did it, Seigneur, he did it; and with not so much of a pause as would serve for an *Ave*. Even when he reached Mamzelle Denise he held his life at stake, for she hung out, poor lamb, on a ragged stump, and had he slipped an inch as he reached after her they were both gone—pouf! But he drew her in, as one might draw a fish on a hair-line, inch by inch. Then he bound her in the skirt of his robe with those swinging cords of his, and climbed back again, liker to a cat than ever. As for me, I was on my knees mumbling. 'Twas all a man could do, Seigneur, and I make no doubt it helped."

Later, as Denise with difficulty held back her tears at the ignominy of bed, she was cheered by the unaccustomed sight of the Seigneur. For all his fondness for the child de Lhoeac held that even in his own house there were places where the master

had scant right to show himself. Denise's night quarters came under this head, and as she saw him the child reared herself bolt upright, and cried—

"Indeed and indeed, Granddad, Denise was not bad."

"Nay, my wench, of that I am sure," and the Seigneur, drawing a stool beside her, laid his arm round her, so that the dark curly head rested upon his shoulder. "Tell Granddad all about it."

"We walked and we walked, and the sun was so hot that Martin said, 'Let us go into the woods.' Then it was cold ; at least, Martin said it was cold ; so we went out again where the nasty rocks are, and Pierre le Bossu was working in the field below. And he waved—so—and Martin waved back. Then Martin said, 'Granddad likes flowers.' And Denise said, 'Yes, and Denise likes flowers too.' 'There is such a pretty one,' Martin said ; 'look, there in the rocks. Is Denise afraid to get it ?' And I stamped my foot, and said, 'Denise is Denise de Lhoeac, and not afraid of anything,' and went to get it. And Martin said, 'Come back ;' but I tumbled. Was Denise bad not to be afraid, Granddad ?"

"No, no, my wench ; but another time Denise must leave the rocks to the goats, lest she play ball with herself a second time."

From Denise he went straight to Brother Martin.

"The child has told me all," he said harshly. "If it was a jest, let there be no more such jests. If it was a trial, her courage has stood the test ;

and who art thou to jest or test Mademoiselle de Lhoeac ? Either way it was a fool's trick. But let that pass. If I speak no thanks, monk, for what came after, it is because such folly strangles a man's thanks in his throat. I give praise to no man who sets another's life and death on a cast, and then snatches life by no more than a cinq-quatre. Let there be no more such tricks, I ay. Do you understand, master priest ?" And Brother Martin answered never a word, good or bad.

Nor was the old lord's wrath unjustified, for though within two days Denise was as she had ever been, the Seigneur's sands were shaken a month for an hour, and after fourscore a month counts for much.

After that Lhoeac again had peace, and the July days ebbed out in tranquillity. But with early August the quiet was again stirred, and again by Denise.

On the crest of the slope upon which stood Château Lhoeac were the ruins of an ancient keep, the victim of fire and sword in the days of the English occupation. The Lhoeac of his days, the Seigneur's grand-uncle, had retired within it, sending to Sir Thomas Chisholme of Starke Hill, the English captain who threatened Lhoeac, a courteous message that he trusted to his care the safety and honour of the defenceless women left in the Château—a bold move, and yet a shrewdly subtle one ; for, full of the chivalry of his time,

Chisholme held the Castle and all within it sacred ; ignoring, indeed, its very existence, saving that he hung to the Lhoeac chestnuts three archers who had dared to cross its threshold.

As for the grey keep on the hill-top, that was another matter, as the Seigneur found to his cost. For eight days he held out, but in a feint assault under cover of night Chisholme—with the barbarity so closely knit with the chivalry of the age—contrived to set the internal, worm-dried timbers ablaze and then block the doorway, penning the besieged like rats in a burning trap.

In vain Lhoeac besought that they might have leave to come out and to fight, even though it were no more than bare-handed against naked steel, and so at least die as men.

Chisholme was obdurate.

"What?" he cried back, "give eight good days to every petty lordling who shakes his fist in our faces? No! by Saint George! Life is too short for such foolishness, and so thou must serve as a lesson to the rest."

As floor after floor sunk under his men's feet Lhoeac retreated to the flat roof, but it, too, crumbled in the terrific heat, and the rising sun found nothing of the ancient keep standing but a cracked and blackened shell, in which, piled slantingly almost to the machicolations, was the still smoking funeral pyre of the defenders.

Since that dismal night the English tower, as it

was in consequence called, had been left to the owls and bats, untouched save that the doorway was cleared of the fire-gnawed rubble which had blocked it. Whether by day or by night the peasants shunned it as the haunt of devils and a place accursed, pointing out as proof that, in spite of the years which had passed, the terrible slope of charred timbers and broken stone had never borne as much as a blade of grass, nor been brightened by one solitary weed. There it mounted, grim and threatening, ghastly, black, and naked, as on the night when it first hid its charnal secrets.

But with Guy de Lhoeac the tower was a favourite resting-place. From thence the Seigneurie spread before him with its pastures, its vineyards, its woods, its corn-lands, its villages, and near at hand the grey pile of Château Lhoeac. It therefore happened, that few days passed in which, at one time or another, the English tower was not visited.

On one of these pilgrimages, as he neared the tower, he heard from within the novel sound of life, the rattle of stones crashing down the crumbling face of the slope, and their ring and clatter as they jarred against the wall at the foot. Thinking that some wild beast had crept there for shelter, he paused, and, grasping his staff as a weapon, waited. Louder grew the sound as the movement drew nearer the door, and with all his hunter's instincts keen within him de Lhoeac stole forward to gain the advantage of surprise. In the jaws of the entrance was

Denise, dishevelled, tear-stained, tattered, and begrimed.

"Martin is bad!" she cried, staying her whimpers as she saw the Seigneur. "Bad, bad! To tell lies is bad, and Martin tells lies."

"What the plague art thou doing here?" cried de Lhoeac, staring down at her too astonished to be angry; "and how camest thou into such a plight?"

"Martin said Denise would find her *Maman* at the top, so Denise went. But," and the grimy face puckered into the fresh beginning of tears, "there was no *Maman*."

"What? Thou didst never climb there, my babe?"

"Denise is not a babe; Denise is a wench, Granddad, and does not tell lies like Martin. Denise did climb. Ouf! but it was nasty! Look what Denise found, Granddad; it was on a little black stick."

From the pocket of her ragged frock she drew a dingy circle of metal, and held it up to the Seigneur. Laying it on his palm, he turned it over curiously. It was a ring, tarnished and weather-stained, but upon the collet, under the corrodings of fire and time, there could still be traced the arms of his house.

"An omen, an omen!" he cried, his eyes lighting up. "What went from Lhoeac has come back to Lhoeac! Granddad will keep this for thee, Denise, and thou shalt have it back when thou art a grown wench."

This time the Seigneur said no word of reproach to Brother Martin, but thenceforth the friar and Denise were never left to themselves whether within the Château or without. Neither to Roger Patcham nor dame Therese was any reason vouchsafed, but both knew from Guy de Lhoeac's harsh insistence that the order was no mere whim, but had some secret stern necessity behind it. So for the second time the Dominican was baulked of his missionary enterprise.

It was in September that the crisis broke—a crisis that robbed Lhoeac of the ministrations of its chaplain.

For all his suspicions the old lord had never varied in his courtesy to Brother Martin, and, as from the beginning of the Dominican's stay at Lhoeac it was the custom that the three, Seigneur, Denise, and friar, dined daily together in that small room in which Jacopo Ravelli had explained the horoscope. Their positions at table never altered. At the head sat Guy de Lhoeac, to his left the child, and opposite her was Brother Martin.

It was Friday, and a *jour maigre*, though the Seigneur and Denise, the one by reason of age and the other of youth, were held excused from fasting. On such days the monk, always frugal, lived chiefly on bread and fruit, and as the meal came to a close he drew a platter of apples to him and selected one at random.

"Now," and he nodded smilingly to Denise, "let

us do a thing which is a custom in my country. To share a good apple is to share a pleasure, we say, and he who shares a pleasure doubles it. There is room for a trick in logic there, Seigneur, is there not?" and he turned to de Lhoeac, whose dim eyes were watching him vigilantly. "If the apple be a pleasure—and who can doubt it, smelling its smell and seeing its colour!—and if the sharing doubles pleasures, why," and he drew a silver knife from his inner girdle, and beat the air with it as if driving home his points, then divided the apple, "each must needs have a whole fruit; though, alas! you, Denise, will find it no more than half for all the logic! There, *petite*, that is the side with rosy cheeks like thine own."

But the Seigneur stretched out a long, lean hand between the two.

"Custom for custom," said he, his eyes never shifting from the monk's face. "In such cases we change halves."

"With all respect," and Brother Martin shook his head with a smile, "a discourteous custom; for see, this half is cankered."

"Then you have the less cause to cavil," answered the Seigneur shortly. "I hold to the custom, master priest."

But Brother Martin pushed back his stool. "And I hold to mine," he said. "Let it rest there, my lord; the thing is not worth bickering over;" and he made as if to rise.

With a half-leap and a stride de Lhoeac was behind him with both of his still powerful hands pressed hard upon the other's shoulders.

"Run thou to thy dame, Denise," he said sternly, "and as thou runnest bid Michel keep the door without until I call ; run, child, quickly."

"Now, monk," and though his hands shook, his finger-tips bit deeply into Brother Martin's shoulders, and his fierce old eyes flamed as they had not flamed in years. "I have no mind to shame either thy church or order, but, by the Lord God who made me, it is eat or hang, for all thy grey frock."

Backwards leaned Brother Martin and stared up into the set face bent above him.

"This way is best," he said ; and lifting the apple, he ate it tranquilly.

"So!" said the Seigneur. "That was bravely done, and like a man. Now may God forgive you as I do." Then he went out softly.

III

That night Guy de Lhoeac wrote, by the unaccustomed hand of Captain Roger Patcham, a letter to the newly-made Lord Bishop of Libourne. An ill-writ, ill-spelt epistle it was, for honest Roger knew no more of letters than would suffice twice a year to let his old and widowed mother in Rye-town know that he lived and thrived, and had sent her

half his pay by a sure hand. A rough and a bluff soldier was Roger Patcham, but he had this saving salt in him, that he feared God without terror, and revered his mother; and it was chiefly because of these two things that the Seigneur came to trust him as he did later on.

But for all its blots, and however much clerkly schoolmen would have gibed at the fruits of Roger Patcham's labours, its meaning was clear; and, after all, what more than that could be desired? Put into equivalent English, it ran something in this fashion :—

*Mye Lord Bysshoppe and dere Bruther,
Thoue wert at suche paynes to fynde me a chyrck-
manne for Lhoeac thatte it wylle greve yr. harte—*

"Plague take it, Seigneur, and with all respect," said Captain Roger, laying down his goose-quill at this point; "cannot I say in so many words the man is dead, and God be thanked! My fingers are crook'd like bird's claws with the cramp."

"Aye, aye;" and old Guy nodded sympathetically; "talk comes easy, and I had forgotten that the brunt of the work fell upon thee. Nevertheless, having gone thus far, we must go on. What was the last word? aye. 'Grieve your heart.'"

—to lern thatte
*Bruther Martyn hath dyde of eatynge an appel
as dy'd al menne. Nexte tyme I wylle chuse
myne owne preste. Ande nowe marke thys welle.*

"Aye, I know, I know," broke off de Lhoeac as his secretary groaned and stretched the knotted muscles of his great sinewy fingers, "but this is the pith of the whole thing, without which all the rest goes for nought."

*If the chyldes Denysse
dyeth yunge notte one denyear of al Lhoeac goeth
to thee. Thatte is clear, mye Lord Bysshoppe, soe
marke it wel I saye agayne, for it is God hys trewth.
Thou wylt knowe why.*

"Now give it to me. Why, man, it is so well and clerkly writ that it matters nothing whether a man doth turn it upside down or not."

DE LHOEAC.

"There ! let him swallow that. For all that he is my brother it had been no great harm to the Seigneurie if he had shared to-day's after-feast with that poor wretch who, to my mind, was the finer man of the two."

To that letter Henri de Lhoeac returned no answer. If it be wise to leave alone dogs that sleep—and the life must be a short one that does not prove its wisdom—how much wiser to have nought to do with stirring up those that snap and are broad awake !

Thereafter followed three tranquil years—years in which, in his growing frailty, Guy de Lhoeac leant more and more on Roger Patcham and never found the prop to fail. His one joy in life was to

sit fronting the hearth in the great hall, where, even in the heart of summer, a faggot was always kept ablaze, and listen to Denise singing the camp chants which he himself had taught her, or the songs which Olivier Basselin had sent out across all France from his home in the Vaux-de-Vire. There, night by night as the dusk grew to dark, the two were to be found like boon companions side by side, he in his padded chair, Denise upon her low stool, his right hand nursed in her lap and her head resting against his arm. And there, as she sang, in the thickening shadows he died ; slipping the cord of life so quietly that the child still held his hand and sung on, unconscious that the eternal had drawn near, even to within arm's-length.

Let the tale of her grief pass. If it is the blessed privilege of youth that sorrows are soon forgotten, it is also its penalty that for at least a brief space the unreasoning, uncomprehending soul of the child can suffer a keener distress than greyer years. So suffered Denise, and with cause. Her wealth of personal love was but small, and its greater bulk had been swept away in a night.

From the hour of Guy de Lhoecac's death Roger Patcham stepped unquestioned into the vacated authority ; unquestioned within the Seigneurie, that is, but presently, as was to be expected, a challenge came from without. How it came to Roger's ears that Henry of Libourne meditated a bold stroke for his own enriching none knew, but five days after the

Seigneur had been laid to rest in the great vault beneath the church of Saint Agnes he marshalled his fifty men in the courtyard behind the Château, and told them bluntly that the time had come to hold Lhoeac even in the very teeth of my Lord Bishop.

"And," added he, "if any one of you dislikes the getting into handigrips with the church, let him go in peace and save his soul elsewhere. To my mind this is no question of lay and cleric and the rights of holy things, but of Lhoeac and Lhoeac and the rights of the child Denise, who is the natural heir. Bide or go, which ye will, but understand this : whosoever bides, and shrinks when the pinch comes, even though it be from lopping short my lord's crozier, by Him who made me I will cut him down as traitor with my own hand, though he had all the scruples of the College of Cardinals. Choose now ; which ?" and not a man stirred from the ranks.

Three hours gentle trot from the Château. Captain Roger halted his troop of thirty picked men. The spot chosen was where the Bordeaux road crossed the bounds of the Seigneurie, for it follows that at Lhoeac he who says Libourne says Bordeaux. Nor had they long to wait. Within an hour the trooper Roger had sent as scout a half-league northward was pounding back through the dust with word that my Lord Bishop was following hard behind.

"And a mixed crew he hath at his back," he

added. "Six men-at-arms, four monks, and as many lackeys with pack-horses."

Whereat Captain Roger smiled grimly.

"So he comes in the power of the Lord, and not in the might of this world! Well, so much the better. The Lord is on the side of innocence, and so there will be fewer blows struck. Saddle up, men, and see that your girths are tight, though I have little fear of an onset. Then form in double line across the road a Flemish pikes-length apart and two from rank to rank. By Saint George! it will be a strong anathema that will find its way to do mischief in Lhoeac through such an array as that!"

Putting his horse to a walk, he went forward a hundred paces, leaving his men standing, then drew rein and sat watching the oncoming cloud of dust which, to his great discomfort, Henri de Lhoeac carried along with him. But thick as was the cloud it could not hide the blink of steel bonnets and the flash of polished bridle-chains, so that presently he settled down to a foot's-pace and gradually the dust blew aside.

"Ha! 'Tis our worthy Englishmen," cried he, spurring to the front. "What? Master Roger Patcham, are the Lhoeac roads so unsafe for simple travellers like ourselves that thou comest out with such a guard to meet us? Changed days already since my dear brother's death. Well, it was a courteous thought. Bid your fellows turn in behind me, and we will push forward."

"So unsafe," answered Roger, "that, to speak frankly, I am here to bid your lordship give Lhoeac the go-by."

"Bid, fellow? Who art thou to bid the Seigneur de Lhoeac do aught but that which pleases him? Aye, and who gave thee license to keep thy head covered? Off with thy bonnet and learn manners; then off with thyself. Thy day is done; Lhoeac has had overmuch of thieves and blood-suckers. Thy day is done, I say."

"You are my dead lord's brother, my Lord Bishop, and so I would not willingly fail in respect, but a shrewish tongue, whether in priest or woman, may goad a man into plain truth at times. Bluntly, you are six; we are thirty, and we hold the road."

"And by what right——"

From the pocket of his buff jacket Roger Patcham drew a parchment.

"The right of law and the right of force," answered he, "and 'tis not often the two pull in double harness in Guienne. This is the will of the Seigneur, Guy de Lhoeac, as drawn by Maitre Jean Deschamp, of the Rue de Tutelle in Bordeaux. He holds the original, signed by the said Seigneur, sealed with his own cypher, and countersigned by five witnesses who are all yet living, two being churchmen."

"Aye, aye; and what then?"

"Bid your men turn back fifty paces, my Lord Bishop, and I will tell you what then."

"But," said de Lhoeac uneasily, "if this should be a snare?"

"Have I not thirty snares at my back?" answered the other impatiently. "That they bide where they are is my proof of faith."

At a gesture from their master the mixed troop of priests, soldiers, and servitors drew to the rear out of earshot, where, at the command of a second gesture they halted, facing the pair left midway between the two troops.

"Now, Master Patcham, make an end of these mysteries. Granted that all is as thou hast said, again I ask, What then?"

"It was for your sake, my Lord Bishop—nay, that is not true, since you are nought to me; it was for Lhoeac's sake; for sake of the love and reverence I bear the dead, that——"

"Tut, have done, man. To preach is my affair, not yours, and what I mislike in myself I love less in others. A moment since you spoke of force and law. The first I see and admit, though this is the King's highway, and in such force there is little of law. What of law, Master Patcham?"

For answer Roger Patcham tapped the parchment.

"Law for all France," said he. "Listen, my lord. Lhoeac is left to me; understand, to me; in trust for the child Denise, and by the Lord God who made me, neither Pope, bishop, nor priest shall touch my right with so much as a finger-tip."

"To thee, fellow? Lhoeac left in thy hands? My brother was mad!"

"The Seigneur, your brother, knew men, my lord. I say no more, and I could say no less."

"And the next thing will be that there is no Denise, no heiress of Lhoeac, no trust; and that thou art Seigneur! God give me patience! Roger Patcham, the hireling trooper, Seigneur of Lhoeac! A pretty plot, by Saint Agnes!"

"This is my lord's message," answered Patcham, keeping his temper and giving no need to the other's anger; "and it is for the giving of it that we too are here alone: 'Tell my brother, and bid him chew well the telling, that if Denise die short of a woman's age—short of twenty that is—I have left the King my heir; and he will be a shrewd bishop that picks such a plum as Lhoeac out of the King's pocket. He will know the wherefore of this. Say to him further; that in spite of Saint Dominic he is still of the Lhoeac stock, and so I command that when Denise comes to her own she shall pay him sixteen thousand crowns; but let him know that the payment is more for the child's sake than for his own. Again he will know why.' All that, my Lord Bishop, is there;" and Roger Patcham struck the folded parchment with the back of his hand till it rang like a pistol-shot.

"Aye, aye, granted that I believe thee, though I do not say that I do, the Seigneur was mad and doting, and the will cannot stand."

"If there is a law in France that will spoil the

King of his presumptive heirship, I have yet to hear of it," answered the other. "The Seigneur had a grey wit, and the will shall stand."

"Rogue !" burst out de Lhoeac, foaming. "What fiend's guile taught him that trick ? But again : granting what thou sayest is true, and that there is no justice in France for a robbed man, what hinders me from entering Lhoeac if I will ? Thou canst not bide by the roadside for ever."

"Enter and welcome," retorted Roger. "I pray God you may ; for it is so written here that if Henri de Lhoeac sets foot within the Seigneurie while the wardship lasts the sixteen thousand crowns are cut in half. But that I am an honest man, Lord Bishop, and so stayed you at the boundary, the sixteen had already been eight. Enter and welcome, I say ; it is so much more in the pocket of Mademoiselle Denise."

Round in his stirrups swung de Lhoeac, and, leaving his left hand on his horse's haunches, jerked his head backward.

"Hulloa ! To me !" he cried ; and so remained, waiting till his troop came up. Then he turned to the perplexed Englishman, who, not knowing what next might follow, had tightened his reins to be in readiness for the first danger.

"I am a man of peace, Master Bully," he went on, speaking loudly so that all might hear. "Thy might makes right, as is too much the case in this unhappy land. Swagger home, thou and thy cut-

throats, and boast of thy prowess ; thirty men have turned back six ! Well, be it so ; but remember there is a God, and Belial will not always triumph, nor might be always right. Come, men, and let us seek honester company."

With a jerk of the bridle he wrenched his beast round, and riding through his troop left Roger Patcham staring.

"Peste !" said he to the world at large as his wits cleared. "That was a cunning move. He saves his crowns and reputation, flouts me, and damns Lhoeac, all with one breath !"

Thereafter neither by word nor act did the offended Bishop deign to condescend to Lhoeac, save that once a year he formally invited his dear niece to his palace at Libourne ; an invitation which was as formally refused.

But though no other direct communication reached the Seigneurie, the man himself was too restless and adroit to stay hidden in a corner. Bruittings of his growing power both in church and state were loud and frequent, and at the last there were not a few who ascribed the peacefulness and prosperity of Lhoeac to the vigilant protection of the masterful prelate—a notion carefully fostered by Roger Patcham.

"Why not ?" said he when the more candid but duller witted dame Therese took him to task for his crookedness. "A rotten tree may shelter a man from the heat as well as would a sappy trunk.

Let Lhoeac suck good from what it can. My faith! Mademoiselle hath not much to thank her uncle for."

And suck good did Lhoeac, prospering within and without, even to the addition of a small estate in Piedmont, though it was an accession at which Roger Patcham looked askance.

"We have both pockets full as it is," he grumbled, "and a hundred and fifty leagues away is a far cry. Besides, he who said 'Italy is the grave of France' said right."

Then with characteristic caution, and in spite of his grumbling, he set himself to see that not a rood of its lands slipped through Mademoiselle's small fingers; so that in the House of Life and of Possessions all was well with the child.

THE HOUSE OF KINSFOLK

I

FOR two more years after the death of her grandsire, old Guy de Lhoeac, the child Denise ran wild, a sturdy, honest-hearted elf of the woods and fields, with body and mind alike in health, but with little growth in the latter. Then Captain Roger Patcham and dame Therese held a counsel over her, with a result that two things became clear—one, that for the heiress of Lhoeac lissomeness and strength of frame were not enough unless the child were to grow up no better than a gilded peasant; and, further, that she must needs have fitting companionship of her own age.

"She is my very life," said the dame, shaking her great white cap, "but that she should lord it as she does is not good. On my word I think children are so many Barbary Turks for ruthlessness, and Denise is no better than the rest. We must put ourselves below stairs, I'm thinking, and set some grand dame to train her, a learned priest to school

her, and another like herself to fine her down. Trust a child to set another child to rights ! They know each other's tricks and thwart them, and so misuse grows to disuse."

"Aye," answered Roger Patcham, pulling his grizzled moustache thoughtfully ; "to say 'must' is easy, but the 'doing' is another matter. How can such as we pick and choose ? A sword, or a pike, or a musketoon, now, you can judge by the heft and swing ; but grand dames and priests ! That is where my Lord Bishop would come in ; but, saving your presence, dame, I would sooner seek them from the devil."

"Aye, I know, I know ; and mayhap be as well served. We have had priests enough from Henri de Lhoeac, though we have had but one. The curate of Saint Agnes might serve at a pinch. He is a humble soul, and will do as he is bid, as the lesser clergy should ; which is no small gain, since you cannot change cassocks as you would shoes. Thou and I, Captain Roger, are not Seigneurs of Lhoeac, and we thrive best with the church by singing small. As to the grand dame and the child, why—aye, it is the very thing. Seek out young Madame's folk. The Seigneur never loved them, and I'll wager they think him still alive and so keep clear of Lhoeac."

So it was settled. With four men at his back to do him honour and give his mission weight, Roger Patcham crossed the passes into Italy, and the tale

of how he fared in no way comes into the life of Denise de Lhoeac, save in so far that he brought back with him an elder and a younger Catherine Cavallazzi—penniless gentlefolks and her cousins thrice removed.

To them Lhoeac was more than a refuge. It was the rooting out from life of the thousand petty cares and sordid cares that early sour the sweetness of even youth itself, and the planting in of peace and love, and that blessed security from pinching want that can stretch out a hand even to the future, unafraid. It was as if into their poverty and daily grind of anxious thought had come the calm and benediction of a higher world.

So the meek and courteous lady, the gentle girl her daughter, and the hardier, more imperious Denise grew into one another's lives, and as the years passed the wisdom of dame Therese was justified.

But for all the peace that blessed Lhoeac, these years that followed the coming of Catherine Cavallazzi to the Seigneurie were stirring years for the world. In them Columbus gave a new continent to Spain; Charles the Eighth went groping after the chimera of Italian dominion, and the spoiler came back spoiled; Roderigo Borgia became the infamy of Rome under the name of Alexander the Sixth; Savonarola laid down his life in fire; France grew the stronger by Brittany, and the weaker by Rousillon and a disastrous campaign;

Henry of Lhoeac climbed higher in power and more towering in ambition, adding to Libourne the Bishopric of Saint-Seurin. Finally, the direct line of Valois failed, Charles of the elder branch went to his own place and Louis of Orleans succeeded to a long-coveted inheritance. But all this passed Lhoeac by. What cared its peasants for the making or breakings of empire. Within the Seigneurie they planted, they sowed, they reaped ; fat years of peace trod one upon the other with no room between for loss or discord till as a child, so now as a woman, Denise disturbed the quiet.

"'Tis very well for you, Father Roger," she declared, "to be content year in and year out. When the itch for life creeps into your blood you whistle up Martin Noret and bid him make ready a span of men, and off you go a-hunting ; wolves or your fellows as the whim takes you or the itch drives. But when I would go a bare half-league from Lhoeac there is as much ado as if Queen Anne went on a progress."

"That," said he, "is lest the hunter should be the hunted. France has but one queen, we have but one mistress, and there are men——"

"La, la, la !" cried she, waving him down with open hand. "Hunted, quotha ! Small chance of that ! As to men, here is Caterina, one-and-twenty, sweet, tall, and fair as any Madonna lily, and never so much as a man to tell her so. Lord ! Madame, look how she blushes ! Madonna lily ! 'Tis a rose

peony. If thou gettest so red at the very name of a lover, where wouldst thou find breath to say 'Thank you kindly' to the thing itself?"

But for all that she jested Roger Patcham took the jest seriously.

"There is young de Crête," he began gravely.

"A buff jerkin hung on a pikestaff," cried Denise, her brown eyes dancing as she saw the fish had bitten. "If I were a hunting dog, now, or even a horse, de Crête might please me and I de Crête, for with them his thoughts both begin and have an end. But I being a woman and he what he is, thou must think again."

"La Clazonnè is a comely lad——"

"Give him to Caterina, then; I want a man to woo me, and not a red cheeked-girl. Try another cast of the net, Father Roger."

"La Clazonnè is no fool," answered Patcham. "Give him another year or two, and his red cheeks—which you have not seen these three years—will be nut-brown and his girlish roundness a man's strength. Then, his land marches with Lhoeac, and when the old lord dies——"

"La, la, la! Lhoeac is big enough for its mistress to please herself. Rack your brain yet again, I say."

"H'm, truly, when the question is weighed thus I own I am—— Madame, such things are more in your way than mine, though Lhoeac is not to be flung to the first comer."

"No, by Saint Agnes! No; nor its mistress

either ; " and Denise stood over him to the full of her inches. For all her slender build she was no weakling, and could look many a man level in the eyes. "We are not chattels, either one or other, Seigneurie or Denise de Lhoeac."

"There is Claud de la Terre-Seche," said Madame Cavallazzi, looking up from her embroidery frame ; "but, Denise, *ma mie*, this sifting of lovers even in a jest is——"

"Aye, Madame Maman, I know, I know, But Lhoeac is dull, and dullness is either a child of evil or evil of dullness, nor does it matter a tags-point which when the two go hand in hand. As for Messire Claud, let him marry a monastery. If a priest would serve my turn I should choose old Pere Junot, who has taught me all these years and has himself learned this much in his teaching : that when I say yea or nay, yea or nay it is, and that's an end of it. *Merci* for Messire Claud, Madame Maman ! Who next, Father Roger ? What ? Is that the tale of the list ? A boor, a milksop, and a monk ! A pretty choice for Denise de Lhoeac, to say nought of Caterina. I would carve better men out of carrots. What ? No more than three for two maids to choose from !

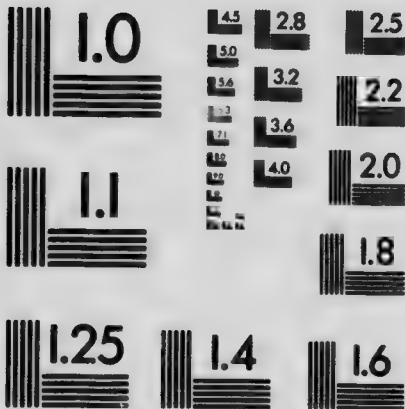
Pity ye our grievous woe ;
Never gallant comes our way :
Love sits by with broken bow ;
Nought hath he——

Thou art right, *ma mie Maman* of the reproachful



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eyes ; Denise is naughty. And yet, what is Lhoeac but a cage and we a pair of pigeons pent within it ?”

Stopping short in her song, she threw her arms round the elder woman, to the great discomfiture of an elaborate headgear, and so made her peace with an embrace that was half-jest, half-earnest, and altogether honest. Indeed, there were few who could long be at odds with Denise de Lhoeac if she once chose to set herself to wheedle them into complaisance.

“A cage !” cried Captain Roger, picking up her words, “a pretty cage, truly, that runs fourteen miles to the north, five to the south, four to the east, and twelve to the west ! God send us all such cages ! Room enough there, mademoiselle, for any pigeon to flap wings and yet never beat the bars.”

“Aye,” she persisted, with a nod of her head. “Yet, if it were as long and as broad as all France, it would be no more than a cage if I fretted to pass beyond and could not. ’Tis the ‘bide where thou art’ that makes the cage and not the length of perch. So you see how it is. Since the world will not come to Lhoeac, Lhoeac must go to the world. Libourne for choice.”

“Because of my Lord Bishop,” said Roger sourly ; “but since my Lord Bishop has had two mitres for his one head he is no longer at Libourne. It was too small for him, and presently I think he will outgrow Bordeaux itself.”

“Bordeaux then before he outgrows it.”

But Roger Patcham shook his head. "Not with my will," he said, setting his face in a fashion Denise understood well, and respected for all that it crossed her purpose. She could trust Father Roger to have sound sense for his yea or nay, and the more so since he seldom thwarted her. "No ! not for all Guienne."

"And why ?" she persisted, rather to save her retreat than force her point.

"The air of Bordeaux is unwholesome for Lhoeac. Try another cast of the net."

"Why not Meluzza ?" It was Madame Catherine who spoke.

"Meluzza !" and Patcham fairly gasped. "Why 'tis a fifteen days' journey."

"Meluzza !" echoed Denise, clapping her hands. "*Ma mie Maman*, thou art the dearest, the sweetest, the—— Oh, Denise must kiss thee for that !"

Again the head-gear was in danger of destruction ; but not for long. Roger Patcham must be wheedled into consenting, and quickly lest he should say no !

"'Tis Meluzza, is it not, Father Roger ?" and she twisted his stiff moustache with dexterous fingers as she leaned across his shoulder. "Italy for Maman and Caterina—look how her eyes shine at the thought. That is the fire to set tinder aflame. I'll warrant thou shalt have three gallants within a week, and all a-cutting one another's throats for love. Aye ! it is a shame to tease thee. Italy for them, Father Roger—they are butterflies and want pleasuring—

and for me life and its serious duties, and to visit my mother's kindred. It is full time I saw Meluzza. Besides, we may meet rogues on the way, and thou hast not hung a man for a week! Fifteen days' journey! Why, 'tis nothing; I would it were a hundred and fifty, since the longer it is there is the more room for change. It is yes, is it not?" and she rubbed her chin softly against his crisp crop of hair as she bent over him.

"Ah, Mademoiselle, Mademoiselle, I think you could lure a bird from a bough if you had a mind to! There will be sore hearts some of these days——"

"All in good time," said she cheerfully, "but there are none now, for that means yes, Father Roger. Caterina mia, we must make a new verse to our song—

Hasten, boy, and string thy bow,
See thy quiver lacks not darts;
Thou and we a-hunting go——

Fill up the last line as thou wilt, Caterina. Hearts or Smarts as thou likest best! I'll wager thou wilt give the one the other before we see Lhoeac again."

II

What is a or gentleman and soldier of fortune to do when war turns peace and princes fight their battles by shifts of crooked policy instead of honest

fire and sword ? That the one may be as deadly as the other is no comfort to the blunt captain who, in the way of duty and having no conscience but his general's, would burn a church sooner than face a Court.

How many a one found answer to the question was shown in the hundred and one bands of brigands which plagued every petty state in Italy. To them rapine by license of war, and rapine by license of the stronger arm and bolder heart, were one and the same, save that the latter had the added risk of a sliding noose.

But Messire Carlo Perego could not so easily solve the difficulty. For his ten years of manhood he had kept his hands as clean as a poor gentleman could whose trade was to fight and do as he was bid, asking no curious questions. For all his poverty, and the strange bedfellows into whose company it had many a time brought him, he had never lost his inborn respect for a certain Carlo Perego who came of an honourable line. The scum of the camp, as poor in crowns as himself and as rich in brute courage—his equals in the sense of fighting value—was still scum, and a foulness to be passed by as heedfully as a man with but one pair of breeches passes the mire of the road ; nor, in his ten years of rough schooling, had he learned that quaint trick of humour that finds every cheat a merry jest, a lie but a kind of quip, and the weakness of woman a thing of prey and laughter.

At all times crowns were slow to come and swift to go, and now, since the peace—or what in Italy passed for peace—which followed the French retreat through Savoy, the flow had not alone been swift, but all one way. Yet, turn frank bandit and play the human wolf he could not. Therefore, for three bitter months he rusted and soured, the bottom of his pocket coming daily to his hand with a sorrowful and most discomfoting ease.

At last, of all his ten years' spoils—never much, since the princes and great lords had first to be gorged—there remained nothing but the clothes on his back, patched and well-worn; the blade by his side, notched and unpolished; and the beast he rode, a thing as forlorn and weary of hungry life as himself. Then it was that the devil, in the fitting shape of Luigi di Gadola, and with a cunning knowledge of his weakness, came and tempted him.

On the face of things—but that was a wile of the evil one—it was a fair enough offer of most honourable employment, and as such, in his dire necessity, Messire Carlo Perego received it, hoodwinking his soul for a brief hour after the fashion of most men at some pinch or other in life.

The two had foregathered at a little wine-shop in the outskirts of Turin, a dismal, evil-smelling den, and no place for a man of di Gadola's wealth, however suited to the other's poverty. Nor was it their first acquaintance. There are camp scum in silken

doublets as well as in tattered jerkins, greater rogues by reason of their greater power, since your rascal, high or low, is the creature of opportunity; and as one of such Carlo Perego had more than once turned his back on Luigi di Gadola. But di Gadola had been all unconscious of the slight, and merely marked his man as one having a cool head, a quick wit, and a light purse. Now, having crossed him in the streets of Turin and tracked him to the sign of "The Golden Pigeon," he looked to buy the two first by grace of the last, for it was clear to his contempt that Carlo Perego was woefully out-at-elbows.

Nevertheless, having somewhat to gain, Luigi di Gadola hid his contempt and played the frank comrade.

"Ha! old friend!" he cried, dropping an open palm familiarly on Perego's shoulder. "This is better than Fornovo! My faith! but the French gave us a bad half-hour that July day."

"Yet of the two I choose Fornovo," answered Perego, with a curt nod of greeting, for it galled him to see now the other's eyes noted each frayed edge and tell-tale threadbare patch. "There at least, there was a man's work to be done."

"Aye! and thou wert ever a glutton for a man's work. Host! another measure of wine here. On my word as a gentleman I have drunk worse a hundred times and been thankful. Does the rogue steal it, d'ye think? A glutton for work! that was ever Carlo Perego! Dost thou remember how I

and thou, though, faith! thou wast leading—how thou——”

“Keep your thou’s for your familiars and your lackeys, Messire di Gadola. I am neither one nor other.”

“Plague take the hot temper of the man!” and di Gadola’s foxy, wizened face wrinkled into what he meant to be a genial smile. “We were comrades, were we not? What? Comrades, I say. Aye! and may be again. Are you your own master, Messire?”

“Aye!” answered Perego, with a hard laugh; “and a poor service it is, with the wages paid in a curse every hour of the day.”

“So? Then this is my lucky day. Casa Foscotti has need of a military governor, Messire Perego. What do you say to the post?”

“Casa Foscotti?”

“My poor house in Piedmont. ’Tis the captaincy of thirty men, and a free hand to do as I like with them. No great thing for such a man as you, but a stop-gap, perhaps, until times are better.”

“A free hand!” said Perego, thoughtfully, as he eyed closely the mean and cunning face turned towards him across the angle of the table. “What may that mean, Messire di Gadola?”

“That? Why it means this”—and Luigi di Gadola shifted his gaze to a cobweb in the further corner of the wine-shop—“save for a thing or two which may touch myself—my neighbours do not

love me over-well—I shall be nothing more than friend and comrade. But in these things—you know our Italy, its enmities, feuds, revenges, and how a man must guard his life even though he strike at another in the guarding—in these things, I say, I must play the master, the general as it were, and you—no offence, Messire Perego—you must obey so long as you draw your forty crowns a month, paid in advance.”

“Forty crowns a month?” In imagination Carlo Perego could hear his last two coins jingle in his lean purse as he looked round the filthy, reeking hole into which his sordid poverty had thrust him. “And only such duties as a man’s honour——”

Down came di Gadola’s clenched fist on the table with such a will as made even the heavy wooden beakers dance and stagger.

“Am I a man to set to such a one as you a task I would not face myself? There may be danger, Messire Perego—I grant frankly that I am not loved, and there may be danger; but talk not to me of dishonour. ’Tis an offence, an offence, I say: or would be were we not comrades and friends. ’Tis for that I let it pass. Are you answered, Messire Perego?”

Which, though it was no answer, and both knew it, was yet the right way to take Carlo Perego, for being himself a man of honour as times went, it cut against his grain to say bluntly that he took another to be no better than a rogue.

Thus it came that for forty crowns he bought his ease and sold himself a month ahead to Luigi di Gadola, who was not the man to come worst out of a bargain. Not, indeed, that the penniless gentleman had much to complain of. That he was little better than a hired bravo he knew, but princes and sovereign states had set the fashion of hiring bravos to further their revenges, aye, and had ennobled them, too, when their work was well done; and so of late the trade had grown into good repute. So long as di Gadola left him a free hand as to methods he was content. What was it, after all, but war on a minor scale?—Casa Foscotti against Castelnovo instead of Medici at the throat of Este! Units at stake instead of thousands.

That it was in violation of law troubled him no whit more than the spoiling of Milan troubled a Sforza. Law, forsooth! A pretty thing it would be if the law were to take upon itself to settle quarrels of honour and the like! These are things of conscience, and above the law. Therefore he provisioned Casa Foscotti, set his sentries, guarded Luigi di Gadola, aye, and made his sorties and fought his frays also, without so much as a discomforting wrinkle in his serenity of conscience. Blood was shed; lives were lost; there was even a burning or two; but it was all frank, fair fighting upon both sides and according to the code of honour.

Too much so to please his patron if the truth were known. But Luigi di Gadola understood his man,

and so pressed him to take no discourteous advantage lest a rupture follow before his work was fully done. To play the master was a card to be kept for some supreme necessity.

On his first coming to Casa Foscotti, di Gadola had taken him up to the broad parapet that lay behind the crenellated coping of the Castle wall.

"You are military governor, Messire ; therefore mark our strength. Here are we perched on this rounded mound. Behind is a bare ravine of two bowshots width, and backed by sloping rocks. A goat might come that way, but nothing on two legs. That is the north. To right and left these hills run south-east and south-west. The valley—*anima mia* ! what a valley it is !—the very fatness of Piedmont. May Paolo Besana burn everlastingly for his—but we shall come to that presently ; 'tis the sorrow and hope of Casa Foscotti. The valley, I say, runs south. All day long the sun streams into it, and a man might hunt the world through and never find such corn-lands, such vineyards, such—saints ! it bursts my gall to think of them and della Besana's accursed folly ! All that you see, Messire, from the ridge behind, round by these slopes and into the glare where a man blinks in the sun at noon, aye, and beyond these slopes, all that is Foscotti. Further south lie the lands of Montalbano. To the sunrise is La Manza. Be wary of these, Messire, in making friendships, for there is some small question of blood between us."

"A quarrel of long standing?" inquired Perego as di Gadola relapsed into silence, and fell a-staring at the mid-distance where the fatness which had so stirred his wrath lay in dappled light and shade—grove, vineyard, and pasture—"and one that touches Casa Foscotti nearly?"

"Of some five-and-thirty years with Montalbano, and, on my life, I have forgotten the wherefore. These things slip a man's memory in time, but the wound remains. With La Manza it is of yesterday, no more than eight or ten years' old, and of much moment, since it turns on the ownership of half a league of marsh. We have already spent thirteen lives upon it, and the call is now with me."

"The marsh must needs be of high value to have cost so large a price," said Perego gravely.

"Value? God knows! There are ducks in winter, for who can catch them," and di Gadola shrugged his shoulders indifferently. "But value or not, it is mine, and what I have I hold; understand that, Messire Perego; and what I have not and want, that I shall get; understand that, too. That brings me to Meluzza, and the evil done me by Paolo Besana. See," and with one hand he gripped Perego by the shoulder, while with the other he pointed southward beating the air with his clenched fist, "see how it cuts into Foscotti! But for it, all within sight would be mine, and, by the Saints, mine it shall be. All this came to me through my mother. My father—God rest his soul!—possessed nought

but the wit to marry her, and it was enough ! Twice she married. First a Besana, who owned what I own, Meluzza being her portion, and between them it was agreed that the survivor should take all. Do you follow me ? That," and again he shook his fist to the south, "that which I have lost was my mother's by birthright."

"And how——" began Perego.

"Thus," said the other, cutting him short, and anticipating the question. "By della Besana she left a son, Paolo. My sire came next, and died before her, leaving me. Then she died also, and I do not quarrel with her that she gave all to my half-brother, since his only child, a daughter, was dead. and he at bitter odds with her French kinsfolk by marriage. Then came the wrong done me. There was a grandchild, Messire, a miserable puling girl child, and with the repentance of death upon him—may God refuse such a repentance ! the time for a man's good works is in his strength and not in his weakness—what does he do ? He robs me of Meluzza, the very kernel and heart of Casa Foscoli, on the miserable plea that, after all, the girl was his own flesh and blood and the last of his race, and so should have something ! Robbed me ! robbed me ! but," and the foxy face grew wolfish and the grip on Perego's shoulder tightened like a vice, "there shall be restitution, and hourly I pray God the day may come soon."

"And who is this girl ?"

The fox that had become a wolf became a devil of malice and uncurbed wrath.

"A daughter of our foes, Messire Perego. Remember that when the time comes. She is called Denise de Lhoeac."

III

Messire Carlo Perego had for six months filled the honourable office of military governor of Casa Foscotti when Denise de Lhoeac reached Meluzza. The three weeks' journey, for all its discomfort of bad roads and worse inns, had never brought her a tedious hour. Even the inevitable mishaps which set Roger Patcham cursing himself for a fool in quitting Lhoeac were but a new delight, and howsoever the miry leagues might weary the flesh the spirit never flagged nor found them dull.

Nor, even after a month of Meluzza, did the time hang heavy. The alchemy of youth turned all the hours to gold. The growing heat of early summer cut half the day out of life, though to Denise it was still a very sweet and very living world that stretched away before her as she sat through the nooning in the shadows of the great porch, staring dreamily over the field swimming in a heat that silenced the very shrilling of the crickets. Of her neighbours she knew little. Roger Hatcham had no love for new acquaintances, but rather a fear, and the memories of Madame Catherine were of that

bitter sort which are none the better for stirring up. Therefore the bounds of Meluzza sufficed them, and the brave gallants Denise had so gaily pictured as fighting to the death for even the barren privilege of a smile were as absent as at Lhoeac. One visitor, indeed they had, and, in that contradictoriness that plagues life at times, him they would gladly have done without.

Early one forenoon Luigi di Gadola had ridden up at a gallop, five men at his heels, of whom Carlo Perego was not one ; had swaggered in at the open door with never so much as a "By your leave," and announced his presence by beating loudly with his heavy whip upon a small table standing midway across the hall.

"Hola ! Hola ! Hola !" he cried, underscoring each syllable with a sounding blow. "Who serves within here ? Hola ! I say ! It was time for thee to come, friend. By the Mass, if I had thee but four-and-twenty hours at Casa Foscotti I would teach thy sleepy head watchfulness. Go, tell thy mistress that her kinsman the *Sieur de Foscotti* hath caught her napping."

"Had the *Sieur de Foscotti* come with fifty instead of five," said Roger Patcham, who had entered the hall behind di Gadola, "he had met with another reception, and one which might have pleased him even less."

Round spun di Gadola, and his fists on his hips, stared at the Englishman up and down.

"And who art thou?" said he, pushing out his lip, "though by the Mass, that matters nought; for understand this, whoever thou art, that Luigi di Gadola rides to Meluzza with thrice fifty if he has a mind to. This time I come as a kinsman."

"So much the better for the *Sieur de Foscotti*," answered Captain Roger, squaring his shoulders in his turn; "but on your part understand this: no party of fifty or thrice fifty gets within bowshot of Meluzza without leave of *Denise de Lhoeac*. As to who I am, I am her poor friend and servant."

"Talk, talk, talk," cried di Gadola. "Why, let me but bring twoscore——"

"Find them first," broke in Patcham; "that is to say, add ten to the thirty at *Casa Foscotti*. I know my business, *Messire di Gadola*."

He is a wise man who knows when he is beaten. In a wink the wolf turned fox.

"Confess, *Messire*, that on your part this talk of stopping me a bowshot off was no more than talk."

For answer Roger Patcham drew back the curtain behind him and pointed through the doorway it exposed.

"There hang twenty steel bonnets," said he, "and on my honour as a soldier I have men's heads within the walls to fill them every one, and as many more who are—elsewhere."

"Aye," said di Gadola, with a cunning look and laying a hand on the other's arm, "but where?"

"On the business of *Mademoiselle de Lhoeac*,

Messire di Gadola. But let the rattle of sword on sword only be loud enough and—you understand?"

"Good, good. Safeguard and close ward is a fine motto, and nowhere truer than in Italy, where quarrels—not that we have one, I come as a kinsman—grow and grow until—poof! all's ablaze! You know the proverb? *Goutte sur goutte fait le fromage*. That is Italy."

But, had di Gadola only known it, it would have been a rare clatter of steel that had made itself heard from Meluzza to Lhoeac.

"And this," he went on, as Denise, accompanied by Maman Catherine, entered the hall, "is our niece? And—what? aye! by the Mass; our dear cousin! Chut, chut; I, too, must go to Guienne and grow young. Though for the matter of that seven-and-forty is no more than a man's age. Cousin Denise, let there be no more talk of uncles; the gap between is none so great. I kiss your—hands," he added hastily, fitting the act to the altered intention as Denise drew back.

Thenceforward for a long hour he held them in close talk, making, at times, the women's ears burn with the blunt frankness of his tales of camp life, until at last Roger Patcham as a hint took pity on the five left to broil in the scorching glare of the sun, whilst the patron drank his wine at his ease in the cool hall.

"Nay, nay," said di Gadola carelessly, "let them bide. Thou and I, Messire, have endured worse a

hundred times. And yet the beasts are good beasts and, aye, with your permission, cousin, they will unsaddle under that great chestnut yonder."

So for another hour he sat and drank and talked, fawning more and more upon Denise until with every sentence there was a touch upon her arm, a playing with the loose folds of her hanging sleeves, a smoothing of her skirt, while she, drawn back to her furthest inch against the wall, sat and shook after a fashion strange to the mistress of Lhoeac.

At last he rose, his eyes glazed and his face flushed with wine, and so staggering in his gait that for very courtesy Roger Patcham could do no less than take him by the arm. And a fortunate thing it was he did so, since but for the restraint Luigi di Gadola would have made his adieus in a strange blend of privileges, uncle, cousin, brother, and the Lord knows what, all garnered into one.

But drunk as he was he could put his thought into words.

"I have it," he hiccupped, leering up into the Englishman's face as he lurched blinking into the sunlight; "the thing has puzzled me these two hours back—ever since I saw that plaguey line of steel bonnets. To beat a stone wall even with a mailed fist is folly; therefore I shall marry her. Give me thy good offices, Master Patcham—Saints! what a mouthful of a name! 'tis like so much soft cheese—thou shalt see that Luigi di Gadola can be grateful. Casa Foscotti was bound to have a mistress sooner

or later, and my cousin may as well have me as another. Eh? Is it a bargain?"

"The Lord forbid that I should meddle with Madame Cavallazzi's affairs," answered Patcham, "but——"

"Madame Cavallazzi! To Mahound with Madame Cavallazzi. 'Tis Denise de Lhoeac I mean."

"Mademoiselle?" and Captain Patcham wrenched himself loose from the hold the other had taken of his arm, sending him staggering back as he did so until he sprawled against the angle of the porch for support. "Is this a drunken jest, Monsieur di Gadola?"

"Drunken!" cried the Sieur, his face flushing yet deeper; "if thou callest this drunken thou knowest little of Luigi di Gadola! 'Tis sober earnest, and as such thou hadst best take it, lest—but the time for threats is not yet."

"But!" answered the Englishman, gnawing his lip in perplexity. "You are her uncle, Messire. The laws of the church——"

"The church!" scoffed di Gadola; "have no fear of the church!" and he laughed derisively. "We of Italy know Alexander the Sixth better than that! A dispensation is worth so many hard crowns, and there's an end of it. As to the uncleship, what was good enough for kings before now may well serve the turn of a Sieur de Foscott! But be not hasty in broaching it to her, Messire Patcham. I will sleep on the project and see if it be the

smoothest way out of the rut, and will tell thee later."

But waking or sleeping, drunk or sober, the idea took such fast hold of his mind that for seven days he haunted Meluzza with the faithfulness and welcome of a spirit damned, until Denise was ready to weep for vexation that she had ever quitted the quiet of Lhoec. In the end she had a watch set, and so soon as the *Sieur de Gadola* appeared within eyeshot, which he did twice or thrice a day, she slipped out into the fields and made her way to a certain arbour on the face of the slope that lay to the south of Meluzza. Even this, being as he supposed a pretended coyness, was but a fresh whet to di Gadolas ardour, and his wrath was great when, on the eighth day of the siege, Roger Patcham bluntly told him the truth.

"Let this folly have an end, Messire. The maid is at her wits' end with terror, and 'tis the first time in fourteen years that I have known her quake. She hides from you like chicker from hawk, like rabbit from weasel. The Lord knows we want no quarrel, but, to be plain, if it is a choice between this harassment and the ill-will of the *Sieur de Foscotti* we men will risk the blows rather than that she should fret another hour."

For a moment di Gadola failed to understand, and sat fingering the wine-cup with which according to his custom he had solaced his disappointment, staring up into Roger Patcham's face the while.

"Harassments? Terror?" he said at length. "Strange language that from such as you to such as I, Master Squire. Be plain, be plain."

"Lord, lord, was I not plain! Have it, then. We like neither you nor your ways, your person, your manners, nor your talk; and whether as kinsman or lover—thou her lover! God save the mark!—Mademoiselle de Lhoeac bids me say——"

But what Mademoiselle had bid him say remained untold. With the snarl of an enraged dog, di Gadola sprang at the other's throat, clawing and tearing at him with his nails, more like a shrewish hag than a man. So unlooked-for was the onset, and so powerful the spring, that Roger Patcham reeled back under it for all his sinewy strength, and it needed no small force to push from him his panting enemy. Still staggering, di Gadola's hand slipped down to his right hip, and had not the noise of the scuffle brought in three or four of Lhoeac's men the Englishman would have had steel between his ribs. The Sieur de Foscott was no man to boggle over a foul blow when it would serve his end. But the sight of the guard sobered him. Leaving behind him nothing worse than a curse and a shake of his clenched fist, he turned on his heel; and presently Roger Patcham could hear the quick thud of his horse-hoofs on the hard sod.

"Let there be a double watch henceforth," he said, turning to the growing crowd of curious faces; "double both in men and wakefulness. My word

for it, he who sleeps at his post is like to sleep till the crack of doom and all Meluzza with him. Plague take the ways of wenches! Why could she not have fooled him a little and then said 'no' prettily? But that's a woman all over. Cursed with downrightness, when she should be politic and yet, when it pleases her, able to coax and wheedle and go to work sideways like a cat after cream."

Thenceforward Luigi di Gadola came no more to Meluzza. But though Roger Patcham's fears were groundless, and the days passed without so much as the blink of his beast's cheek-chains showing in the sun, Denise still fled daily to her arbour, and thus, in an unexpected fashion, widened her knowledge of her kinsfolk.

It was a fortnight or thereabouts after the rupture with Casa Foscotti, and Father Roger's precautions, though not relinquished, were less keenly set on edge. A guard no longer kept Denise in sight whithersoever she went, though at first it had tramped within flutter of her skirts, so that the sight of a single wayfarer crossing the fields afoot gave her no alarm. Indeed, now that the issue betwixt Lhoeac and Casa Foscotti was knit, the young chatelaine's courage had come back.

Nor was there anything in the man or his greeting to set her fears fluttering. Almost a generation older than Luigi di Gadola, his grave, smooth-shaven face, broad in the brow, full in the cheek, firm in the mouth, square in the chin, was set in a half-

circle of silvered hair that fell almost to the shoulders. Broad and strong in build, he carried himself in an arrogant fashion that agreed but little with the severe and modest greyness of his dress, which, from velvet cap to buckled and beribboned shoes, was colourless in its sobriety. A sword, shorter and more slender than the vogue, was looped to his leather belt, and the poniard on his right hip was pushed back almost out of sight, as if its wearer would say, 'I am not one who has need of thee.' On his breast, hung by a purple cord round his neck, was a small crucifix of dull bronze.

"Thanks be to Saint Agnes, who has answered my prayers," said he, stretching out both hands as he came abreast of Denise. "Nay, surely Lhoeac need have no fear of Lhoeac; and thou and I, pretty one, are the last of our ancient race." Then, as Denise still shrank back, his face darkened, and he cried with a quick show of passion, "What? Has Master Patcham's misguided and unworthy zeal so outrun truth and discretion that thou art afraid of thy uncle Henri? Sad changes, my niece, since I held thee in these arms nineteen years ago, and watched thy mother—thou a sleeping babe—slip quietly to rest. That thou hadst two uncles to guard thee was her great comfort; though, indeed, sweet soul, she was full of comfort in herself."

It would have puzzled my Lord Bishop to have told what he meant by these last words. But they

rounded off his sentence, and he knew Denise was in no mood to be a stickler for verbal niceties. Besides, nine times out of ten what tickles the ear pleases both spirit and mind, and words are hypocrites that easily assume the disguise of truth.

"You?" she answered, still shrinking back; "you, my Lord Bishop of Saint-Seurin?"

"Nay, nay, nay, that is for the world at large; with thee I am neither priest nor bishop: nought but kinsman."

"But Father Roger said you were at Bordeaux. How then——"

"I am where it is needful I should be to watch over thee, my child," and Henri di Lhoeac's white teeth showed in a smile: "Lhoeac or Meluzza, France or Italy; 'tis all one; and never didst thou need safeguardianship as thou dost to-day, or, to be precise, as thou wilt to-morrow."

"I have Messire Patcham," and Denise straightened her lips even as old Guy de Lhoeac might have done. "We are not easily afraid at Meluzza."

"Poor maid! poor maid! How can an honest dog like Master Patcham hope to match the wits of such a fox as Luigi di Gad-la? I know him of old and how he hungers for this Naboth's vineyard of thine; therefore am I at Casa Foscotti for the good of my health, his very close friend and thy protector. Now mark this, my child: go to thy booth to-day if thou wilt. Dream, and be happy, as

a child should—and in the ways of this evil world what art thou more than a simple babe?—dream and play thyself to-day, but for thy life's sake, aye, and for more than thy life, go not there to-morrow. Tell all that to Master Roger; the hint may set his honest, but somewhat heavy, wit a-working. And now, my child, I must return by the circuit by which I came, for it would go ill with thee and with me if Luigi di Gadola guessed that I but played a part with him."

Bending forward, he kissed Denise on the forehead and gravely marked her with the sign of the cross, but as he turned away she caught him by the arm.

"And are you too in danger, and for me! My lord, my lord, all these years I never dreamed that you loved me."

"Chut, chut!" and he patted her hand gently. "No more of that. Are we not Lhoeac and Lhoeac?"

But when Roger Patcham heard of it he only said with a grudging admiration—

"Plague take his priestcraft! The malice of Luigi di Gadola is too soon for him by a full year. There are sixteen thousand crowns to be won or lost. And the winning of them is much for the good of his health!"

Yet, for all his cynicism, he was too astute to despise the warning, and that night he held close counsel with Denise's ~~ma~~ *mie Maman*—counsel

from which she went away weeping, and with a sorrow on her face to which it had been a stranger for full nine years.

IV

The cool and grateful freshness of the night had not been fully dried out of the next morning when Luigi di Gadola sent for his military governor. His justice-room was what he loved to call that square south chamber on the ground floor, nor in doing so was he even dimly conscious of the cynical perversion of the truth. Little of justice and much of the law of the strong arm and the hard heart had been dealt out there, and many had been the villainies planned across the wine-stained table that filled the centre of the floor.

A bachelor's room it was from corner to corner. Here was a trophy of arms, rust-eaten and neglected; the blades dim, damp-worn and hung awry, broken spider threads floating from their points. There a buffet of strong waters and wines of many growths, its polished boards a puddle of spilt dregs from an overturned beaker that lay tilted, bottom uppermost, on the wreck of a glass goblet. In the corners the litter of a week's occupancy—crusts of bread, torn fragments of papers, flagon stoppers—all swept carelessly aside; the hangings in tags and tatters, the curtains to the sides of the lowest

windows frayed and unlooped, and on the wall a picture or two, which for vile frankness would have stained the Grand Turk.

In their six month's intercourse Messire Carlo Perego had learned to know the moods of his worthy patron, and therefore at first sight of Luigi di Gadola's face he braced himself as he had done of old when he looked above his own sword's point at three naked blades and knew there was a blind wall barring his retreat five paces behind him. That snarling smile catching up one corner of the evil mouth, that shifty restlessness in the half-closed eyes that after the first quick upward glance roamed everywhere but into the face of the man he spoke to, that gnawing of the thumb-nail, that incessant beat of the foot, boded ill for somebody, and at the risk of Messire Carlo Perego! The monkey was eager for a fresh batch of chestnuts, and the cat must risk its paws in the clawing of them from the fire!

"There is a service, my friend, that I must seek from thee and to-day," began di Gadola softly, drumming his finger-tips on the table as he spoke; "a service, but not of danger. One rather that proves how high a store I set upon thy wit. 'Tis a thing that most men do but once and then do for themselves, but with me there are reasons which— which—prevent, as thou wilt see. 'Tis a subtle thing I seek done, subtle and strange; for— —" and he broke off with a forced laugh, "it is nothing

less than the winning of a maid. I am about to marry, Messire Perego."

"A maid!" cried Perego, aghast—"a maid, and I to win her? What moonstruck madness is this, Messire?"

"Sober truth," and Luigi di Gadola shrugged his shoulders with affected carelessness. "Sooner or later a man such as I am must play the fool and bring home a wife. These, of course, must come from the walls, and for a time we shall change our ways, but not for long. No, by the Mass, a man cannot shed his habits as a snake his skin, unless, indeed, he outgrows them—a rare thing after two-score. For a month or two we must play the anchorite, and then, my friend, hey for the old days and the old ways again! After all, women love a wild rake. The greater pride theirs, d'ye see, that they have tamed him."

"Yes, yes," answered Perego, "but what has all this to do with me?"

"Why this"—and the patron's manner grew more assured; the ice was broken, and all that remained was for the other to take the plunge with the best grace he could—"the girl, being young, is wild and foolish. Shy, too, or cunning. By the Mass! it is hard to tell which, for she plays Will-o'-the-wisp and dances for ever just out of reach. A pretty game enough for a man to join in when his blood is hot, but one that hardly matches the dignity of the *Sieur de Foscotti*. 'Twill be your

part, my friend, to bring the play to an end, and so earn both our thanks."

"My part? Little as I know of women's ways—a man should have his pocket well lined before he thinks twice of them—this much I am sure, a man had best do his own wooing, or not do it at all, which at times is better than the best. Where does my part come in?"

"Did I say woo? Win, man, win; not woo. I myself can see to that later. As to thy part, it is to take Sandro and Flemish Hans with you and bring her here."

"What? Whether she will or no?"

"Chut! A hand across the mouth, an arm round the waist, a heave to thy saddle-peak, and thou hast enough of her will for thy purpose. Besides, there is no need to go to Meluzza, and if the thing miscarries Mademoiselle de Lhoeac knows neither one nor other of you. I took care of that!"

"Mademoiselle de Lhoeac! Then it is flat abduction. I will have nought to do with it, Messire de Gadola."

"Mademoiselle de Lhoeac it is, and whether flat abduction or no thou shalt have to do with it, thou and no other. What, man! have I paid thee forty crowns a month these eight months for dear love of thee? A pretty fool I should be! Forty crowns a month, when I could hire a hundred as needy rufflers as Carlo Perego for as much a year!"

"Hire them, then, and let them do your rogues' work. I wash my hands of it and Casa Foscotti."

"By the Mass, that thou dost not! Why, 'tis but four days since thou drewest pay, and now thou wilt wash thy hands of Casa Foscotti and call it quits! Am I a fool, Master Perego? Bluntly, man, thy word is pledged; the pay has passed and I hold thee to thy bargain."

"But my honour——"

"But thy word! Is there no honour in thy word! Can broken honour patch up honour? Was thy word pledged or no, Messire Perego? Remember the Silver Pigeon and answer me that."

"Aye, but I should have a free hand."

"Except in what touched myself. What? Is that not so? Was I not honest with thee, scrupulously frank and honest? Besides, what harm can take the girl? Is not her most reverend uncle here at Casa Foscotti?"

"But," objected Perego slowly, for he felt the net closing round him and knew not how to escape, "I have never so much as seen Mademoiselle de Lhoeac."

"Nay," and Luigi di Gadola chuckled gleefully; "I took care of that! Should she slip thy fingers, dead or alive, none can ever say, 'Casa Foscotti'! Yet that thou dost not know her makes no odds. She is a tall rush of a girl, pale and frightened, and thou wilt find her within an hour in the booth on the slope beyond Meluzza. Let there be no parley-

ings, Messire Perego, for once a woman gets talking a man may look to himself. Do as I said at the first—slip a hand across the mouth and an arm round the waist, and the thing is done. After that, if——”

He paused in his voluble talk, and, looking aslant at the other, stood tapping his teeth with his fingernails irresolutely.

“If?”

“If thy dagger was loose in its sheath it would be no great harm. No, stay; that would be too plain a tale, and so raise a hue and cry. Let me think, let me think. If she slipped off thy beast’s haunches crossing the ford—aye, that is better; there is a broad pool but twenty paces——”

“Man, man,” broke out Perego, “is it plain murder you hint at?”

“Murder!” echoed the Sieur. “Chut, chut! who talks of murder? Hast thou never seen a man drown? ’Tis the simplest thing in the world. There are five hundred crowns——”

“To the devil with you and your five hundred crowns. You have netted me in your web, Messire di Gadola, bought me body and soul. But understand this: when I have kept my pledge and handed Mademoiselle de Lhoeac to the safe keeping of my Lord Bishop of Saint-Seurin, I am done with Casa Foscotti, and will go——”

“Back to the kennel I plucked thee from! Go and welcome, dog, but do my bidding first. As to

my Lord Bishop, why, I shall have a word to say to Hans the Fleming about that. Begone about my business, Messire Perego, and lag not by the way. Thou hast two hours in which to earn thy month's wages !"

Dog, Luigi di Gadolo had called him, and currish enough Carlo Perego felt himself as he crossed from the shelter of the hillside, and rode towards the slope whereon was the harbour of Meluzza. A dozen times in his half-hour's ride he had it in his mind to put spurs to his horse and leave the Sieur de Foscotti to do his own evil work, but two things restrained him. One, the power of his pledged word ; he had known that his patron was no better than scum of the camp, and so sold himself with his eyes open. Now that the thing had come to pass which in his heart he had known from the first must needs come sooner or later, and for the doing of which he had taken pay, could he with any conscience shirk doing his part ?

But his second reason was even stronger, and doublefold. Let him have what qualms he might, Flemish Hans and Sandro the Pisan, who rode so closely behind him, would have none. Better in every way that Denise de Lhoeac should fall into his hands than into theirs. So with a bitter heart and a troubled, scheming brain, he let his beast pick his way along the middle-path that wound across the face of the slope, comforting himself with the hope that, after all, it might be a barren quest.

Scant and short-lived comfort it was, for within the booth there was the flutter of a white dress, and just such a woman as di Gadola had described stood in the furthest corner—tall and slender, pale of face, and frightened enough in all conscience.

The sight of her terror and weak helplessness smote him like a whip-stroke, and but for the two who for the moment held their place discreetly out of view, he would have swung himself back into the saddle and taken himself and his shame elsewhere. As it was he slowly hitched his beast's reins round one of the latticed bars of the booth, and called roughly to his two followers to dismount but bide where they were.

"Your uncle, Mademoiselle," he began, bowing with a stiff ceremony very unlike the accustomed gaiety of Carlo Perago, "has sent me to——"

"My uncle, Monsieur?"

"Aye, my Lord Bishop of Saint-Seurin."

"Ah!" and a light flashed into the girl's eyes; "true, I had forgotten that he also is at Casa Foscotti. Yes, Monsieur, what of him?"

"He—stand back there, fellows, as I bade you. What! must I speak twice? Stand back, I say—further, further!"

"What, Monsieur? You have men there!"

"No more than two, Mademoiselle, and I pledge my word you need have no fear of them."

"Why should I, Monsieur? Or of you either. Are you not my uncle's friend? You were saying that Monseigneur de Saint-Seurin——"

Carlo Perego bit his lip in silence. Minute by minute his self-contempt grew keener, and in his misery he cursed the two cut-throat louts that they had not held their ground when they pushed forward, and thus given him cause to turn upon them, and slash a way back to honour out of the toils that held him. But they had gone to heel like dogs, and so left him no excuse. Needs must that he go through with the evil business, but how to play the ruffian with that pale face and sweet, pathetic fearfulness plagued him sorely. Best be blunt.

"I find it hard to lie, Mademoiselle de Lhoeac," he began, speaking bareheaded, and with his feathered cap held to his breast.

There he stopped. Bluntness was not so easy with those troubled eyes turned full upon him.

"That I am sure," she answered as he paused; "I do not think, Monsieur, that you have a face that lies. You are sent to take me to Casa Foscotti, and what you do, you do under compulsion; is it not so?"

"To my shame it is?"

"Then let us go, Monsieur; only, I pray you, let not one of those you have outside there touch me. I should be shamed for ever."

"I would to the Lord they would but try," answered Carlo Perego between his shut teeth. "I say again, have no fear for them."

Loosening his reins, he mounted and held out his hand.

"Your foot in the stirrup there, Mademoiselle."

"What, Monsieur! Am I to ride *en croupe*?
Mon Dieu! I shall tumble off."

"Nay, have no fear. Hold my belt, Mademoiselle. Further forward on the right; aye, so. Now on the left, still forward, still forward. There, that is safe. Do your hands touch, Mademoiselle?"

And a small voice from behind said, "Yes, Monsieur."

"Now, men, forward! Return as we came, but do you lead. Halt, halt, halt! Not so fast over this rough ground. Are you at ease, Mademoiselle?"

"Not at heart, Monsieur."

Carlo Perego groaned. In the frank readiness with which she had aided him he had half-forgotten what lay before her at Casa Foscotti. His plan had been to give di Gadola the go-by, and invoke for the girl the protection of Henri de Lhoeac; but now the conviction came sharply home to him that his patron was no man to respect Henri de Lhoeac whether as guest or priest-bishop. Truly, she had good cause to be troubled at heart, better cause than she knew, and as he felt her grip tighten at the swaying of his beast, and the stir of her breath upon his hair, his self-abasement was abysmal.

"Monsieur," whispered a voice in his ear. They were following the trend of the hill eastward, a hundred yards or so from the crest of the ridge, and the walls and turrets of Meluzza showed clearly at times through the gaps of the wood. "Monsieur."

"Mademoiselle ?"

"As God shall be your judge, answer me truly. Can Monseigneur de Saint-Seurin save me ? I am but a girl—not a brave man like you ; and so—and so"—there was a catch in the breath—"and so it takes a little courage to face death."

"Death !" he echoed, checking his beast with a jerk ; "not that, my God, not that ! He spoke of marriage."

"Marriage with Luigi di Gadola ! 'Tis one and the same. It is Meluzza he wants, not Denise de Lhoeac, and so, marriage or no marriage, it is death. What of Monseigneur de Saint-Seurin ? Ah ! I understand, Monsieur, I understand ; your silence is enough. May God show you mercy in that you have not cheated me with lies. Your face told me you were true at heart, though your errand gives it the lie."

Again there came the catch in the breath, and as he felt the quiet spasm of her sob, no outcry but a silent weeping born out of the weakness of nature whether she would or no, Carlo Perego groaned afresh and cursed himself softly.

"An hour ago I thought I could brave it out," she said presently as her sobs quieted, "but with the life so full, and the world so good, it is—it is——" and again her breath went from her with a gasp.

"My God, my God !" cried Perego between his shut teeth, "have you no curse for me, Mademoiselle ?"

"Why should I have ?" answered she simply.

"If this must needs come, then rather you than another. From my heart I thank you for your gentle courtesy. But see, Monsieur, your friends are impatient. We lag behind and go too slowly for them."

Perego's horse had fallen to a walk, and from time to time the Fleming and his fellow-rogue halted and looked back, as if in wrath at the delay. They were beyond Meluzza now, and were turning down the hill to cross the river to the valley lands of Casa Foscotti. Once there it was level ground and a short trot home.

"Friends!" he echoed, waving his hand to them to ride on. "That scum? Yet you are right, Mademoiselle. To you we are but birds of a feather. Cursed be the hour that ever I passed my word to Luigi di Gadola!"

"A pledge to do evil? That is to set man's law above God's, Monsieur; and yet," she went on after a pause, "I am but a girl, and a man must do that which his honour and conscience bid him."

"Aye!" and Carlo Perego smote his clenched fist on his saddle-peak, "and God helping me so I will. My faith is yours, Mademoiselle, and before the Sieur de Foscotti, or one of his scoundrels, lays finger on you he must slay Carlo Perego."

"No, no, never that," she cried, her grip tightening pleasantly; "promise me, Monsieur, promise me, never that."

"This time the oath holds," answered he, with, for the first time that day, something of the old gay ring in his voice. Now that there was trouble in the wind his spirits rose. "Hold tight, Mademoiselle—tighter, tighter; we must fool these rogues lest they take me at a disadvantage. Thank God, I am quit of di Gadola, and there is a man's work to be done at last!"

Down the hill they jolted, Carlo Perego holding his beast with a tight rein as it slid and stumbled down the smooth, sun-baked sod towards the river's bank, where Foscotti's men had halted and were awaiting him.

"Go on," he shouted; "the ford is over-narrow for three, and there is no need to splash Mademoiselle."

For a moment they hesitated, speaking rapidly one to the other; then as Carlo Perego slowed down his pace, the Fleming turned into the water and the other followed him.

"So?" muttered Perego, watching them keenly. "More than I know the strategic value of a river bank! You have saved my life, Mademoiselle. Luigi di Gadola never meant that I should reach Casa Foscotti alive. He knows the truth of the proverb, 'Dead men make no war.'"

By this time the two men-at-arms had climbed the further bank and turned their beasts to face the ford, and in such a fashion that they dominated the further exit. Once opposite them, and with no

more than the breadth of the river between, Carlo Perego reined up.

"Loose me, Mademoiselle," he cried softly. "Quick, for the Lord's sake, lest they fall upon us before I am ready! So, now grip the saddle with both hands and hold fast."

Springing to the ground, he turned his horse's head towards the steepest slope of the bank, where the current had dug out the soft soil, leaving the top an overhanging mass of matted fibres, where neither man nor beast could get sure foothold. Then he dealt it a sounding blow on the neck with his open hand, driving it forward with a start that nearly flung the girl to the ground.

"Not Cæsar Borgia himself could have devised a neater defence, and Cæsar is no mean captain! Let aught bigger than a cat try that path, and my word for it the crumbling sod will souse him over his ears. Now, you rascals, woman-slayers and liars in wait, if you want your blood-money, earn it like men!"

Drawing his sword, he set himself squarely in the narrow, worn path that led to the ford, where, if Gadola's men tried to rush him, he would have the advantage of the rising ground, and waited.

Not for long. They had all of a brute's courage, both Fleming and Pisan, and after a brief pause of astonishment at the new turn of affairs they plunged again into the river, making ready for the attack as they rode. The odds were still with them, though

they had lost the advantage both of surprise and position, for Carlo Perego had read their purpose aright. It was no part of the *Sieur's* plan that either he or the girl should gain the ear of my Lord Bishop. If Denise de Lhoeac were found at the bottom of a pool unwounded, and Carlo Perego not far off with a sword-thrust through his ribs, who would connect the two, or link the quiet of either with the master of Casa Foscotti?

Yet the sight the rogues saw as they crossed the stream was not one to put heart into them. *Mademoiselle's* low cry, more wail than words, "Oh, Monsieur, Monsieur!" had but made him set his teeth the harder, and confirmed his purpose to an exulting desperation, for it seemed to Messire Carlo Perego that its sharpness had something more in it than a girl's unreasoning terror. She was Denise de Lhoeac, and he—well, he was what he was, a discredited soldier of fortune, and therefore leagues removed from her. Therefore the best thing that could happen would be that he should save her, and perish in the saving. The dying—that counted for little: the saving—that was all.

So the face the two saw above the steady sword's point was hard-set, resolute, almost joyous, and calm with the tranquil determination of a spirit that knows the worst the world holds, and has no dread of it—altogether an ugly face for men on such an errand as theirs.

No duel this of nice skill and long-drawn careful-

ness of thrust and parry ! Once clear of the water, they both rammed home their spurs, and so drove at him headlong. Then, for the first time, he shifted his point. To the girl who, open-eyed and open-mouthed, leaned back with one hand on the horse's flank the other mechanically clutching the saddle, it seemed as if summer lightning had flashed in her eyes so quick was the sweep of the blade meeting the attack. Not at the men. This was no time for courtesy, no, nor for pity to the brute beasts, who were the lesser brutes of the four. Across the muzzle of the one and the ears of the other swept the stroke in the one curve, so that they reared, whinnying, and swerved backward, one stumbling and flinging Sandro the Pisan upon the smooth, dry stones of the river's margin. Then back came the blade to its steady poise, across which the alert, hard eyes looked out unwinkingly.

Not twice was Hans the Fleming to be caught napping. His rasping spurs drove on his unwilling beast, and this time the stroke was parried, nor, thereafter, had Carlo Perego leisure for aught but the blade that in its deadly quickness seemed in three places at once. As for the girl, for all her watchfulness she never knew how they fought or fared. It was no more than a bewilderment of shooting light flung in the eyes as the sun caught one or other twisting blade, of ringing clash and clatter, of faces wherein the lurking devil leaped to the eyes and looked out o' window, of hard-drawn

breath and busy, shifting feet, and now and then a rough oath to underscore the hate; all so new, all so undreamed of in her innocence that she but gasped and stared, past thought, past sense, past even prayer, and understanding nothing as to which had the advantage.

Then, as she watched, gaping, of a sudden came the end. Up went Flemish Hans' left arm into the air as he reeled back in his saddle, foaming redly at the mouth. There he swayed for an instant, groaning with a rattle in his throat that was half a laugh. Then he flung himself forward on his enemy's unrecovered sword, dealing Carlo Perego such a thrust that the two fell together in a heap upon the bank, and rolled down on to the dry edge of the waterway.

Nor was she even clear as to what followed. As she sat staring, her dry lips moving dumbly, she saw the Pisan rise upon his knees and left hand and look round him confusedly. He still held his sword-hilt, but the blade had been snapped off short in his fall. For a moment he knelt, dazed and blinking, his evil face an ugly mask of pain; then his sight cleared, and as he saw Carlo Perego stretched upon his back ten feet away, and Hans the Fleming by him, stone dead, he laughed aloud.

"The sure man is the safe man," she heard him mutter as he shuffled forward on his knees through the stones, casting aside the hilt as he went, and groping for the dagger at his hip.

Down to the dry sod she slid with no certain purpose in her mind, but as she moved the glint of the Fleming's sword struck up from the grass where it had fallen as he tumbled. Swiftly, and yet half as in a dream, she caught it up, and as the Pisan reared himself to give his blow the fuller weight, she leaped downward, flinging herself upon him with the blade at the charge.

Afterwards Roger Patcham, who found all four huddled there under the bank, said that it was as shrewd a stroke as it had been his luck to see, and honest Roger was no mean judge. But whenever Caterina recalled that day she shivered as with an ague, and her face went whiter than the milk-white gown she had worn.

THE HOUSE OF MARRIAGE

I

OF the four he found upon the water-worn stones, there were two at least with whom Roger Patcham had no need to cumber himself. Hans the Fleming and Sandro the Pisan had taken their wages in full and left Luigi di Gadola's treasury none the poorer for the payment. Carlo Perego in the one case, and Caterina in the other, had discharged the debt after a fashion that never leaves the quittance in dispute. As for Carlo Perego, Roger Patcham would have left him where he lay, that he might follow the other two at his leisure, but for the girl's outcry.

At the first dash of water in her face she had sat up, dazed and staring, and then gone promptly off into a second swoon at the sight of Messire Carlo, who, indeed, was no pretty object for a damsel to look at, with the blood-smears and grit of the river-bed trailed across his face. Brought to life again, she had added to Captain Patcham's perplexed won-

derment at women's ways by going down on her knees and taking the ugly head upon her lap with an utter disregard for the whiteness of her robe.

"Let the fellow bide," said he roughly. "'Tis a plain enough reading of the old adage : rogues have fallen out and honest folk have come by their own."

"Is he dead?" asked she, looking up fearfully into Patcham's stern face and heeding his words not at all. "Really, really dead?"

"Dead or living, what boots it to us? 'Tis but a rogue more or less. Let him bide."

"Let him bide?" she cried, shrilly, "let him bide who gave his life for me? Shame, Captain Patcham, shame!" Then her hysteric wrath quavered into tears. "Is he dead, Monsieur? For the Lord's sake tell me the truth."

Whereat, grumbling and still much perplexed, Roger Patcham went down on his knees in his turn and found Carlo Perego living, but in an evil case.

"If he bides he dies," said he, shaking his head and looking from the stricken man to the girl; "and being one of Casa Foscotti's men, why, it were no great harm——"

"If he bides I bide too," answered she, setting her mouth after a fashion he had never before seen in Caterina Cavallazzi; "and, oh! Monsieur, Monsieur, indeed and indeed it was for me he fought, and if he dies it will be for me—for me." Out across the smeared face, with its staring, unseeing eyes, she

leaned and caught Roger Patcham by the arm "For the Lord's sake be merciful and save him. Oh! I think you men have hearts like stones. Had your mother no pity in her that you are so cruel hard?"

"Let my mother be, Mademoiselle Catherine," he answered gruffly. "Here, two of you, leave off staring and hoist him up in front of Pierre. Gently, fools—this is no charcoal sack you are handling. So; now his head in the hollow of your arm. Good, you have the trick of it, and when the time comes will nurse a babe bravely! Forward, but not over-fast: the world to come is no more than a jolt's length from him. Mademoiselle, behind me. There, there, let thanks be: mayhap I was a trifle rough. You still will talk? By Saint George! one would think it was your lover that—aye, I thought that would stop your clacking. You women push a man too hard at times. Faith! I can feel the blush through the broad of my back!"

But Roger Patcham was not done with women's tongues for that day. Madame Catherine and he were scarcely settled in the former's day-room, with its pleasant outlook down the sun-steeped length of the valley, when Denise broke in upon them, her eyes ablaze with wrath in the true Lhoecac fashion. Whatever of gentle sweetness she might have drawn from her Italian mother, much of the long line of French Seigneurs had also gone to her making, and at sight of her Roger whistled and set himself to

meekness as he would have done in the long-past years with old Guy, her grandsire.

"What wicked trick is this you have played upon me, you two? Nay, rather you, Captain Patcham; for the sending that lamb to the slaughter was no mother's doing but like a man's cold cunning. Am I a weakling babe to be thus petted and kept in the dark while another risks her life for my sake?—I who a year hence will have all Lhoeac at my back for the mere raising of a finger? I will brook no such conspiracies against my honour, Messire."

"You have that now, Mademoiselle," began Roger ignoring with much discretion the matter at issue. "I believe from my soul there is not a scamp of them all but would follow——"

"Ta, ta, ta!" she broke in, with a stamp of her foot. "Let Lhoeac be, Captain Patcham. The question is, why I am fooled and hoodwinked, cozened like a child with sugar-plums, while Caterina—ah! *ma mie Maman!* Now I understand thy red eyes, these many weepings when thou thoughtest no one saw thee, and why for four-and-twenty hours thou who art so gentle have been doubly gentle; and here am I scolding and berating thy love like the graceless vixen I am. But, Father Roger, tell me this: by what right——"

"The right of the least danger," answered Roger Patcham gravely. "The girl had but to say I am not Denise de Lhoeac, and——"

"And that villain would have killed her without

mercy to heal his vexation and keep her tongue quiet. And had he not, what manner of man is that vicious sot, my half-uncle, that thou shouldst trust him with our Caterina? I know. Oh yes, I know. It was for love of me thou didst it; but yet, had it gone ill with Caterina——"

"But it has not gone ill. Let the past rest, Mademoiselle." Roger Patcham, being uneasy in his conscience, was growing restless.

"Not gone ill? That is what a man says, and all because her life is whole in her; as if life was all! Were you a woman and saw her white face you would not say that. And yet," and Denise broke into a laugh, her eyes sparkling with a new thought, "and yet it may be that you are right. A week hence I will tell you, and then, to punish you both, will claim a whim from you whether you will or no."

"As to whims," said Roger ruefully, "I think that in the granting of whims we mostly have no choice."

"Then I shall have two!" cried she, still laughing, "the one to make the other good! And take this to your heart, I will have no 'nay' to either of them, Father Roger. No, not though your face grow as long as your sword-hilt at the bare thought of them. But what," she continued, harking back to her first thought, "was the sense in flinging Caterina at Monsieur de Gadola's head?"

"To force his hand and let him know that thereafter Meluzza was on the watch."

"Aye, but why have risked her? Why not have let him find the harbour empty, and Meluzza been on the watch all the while?"

"Because needs must that there be a rupture, and a rupture beyond patching, lest he play the friend and fool us under our noses. Oh! it was not for nought we baited the trap. Thank the Lord his Messire Perego played the true man at the last."

"And a true man I take him to be," returned Denise, nodding her head with the mature wisdom of nineteen and all its sere knowledge of the world. "Remember 'tis your own word, Father Roger, a true man, and give my whim the week to ripen;" and she left the room with the laughter still playing round the corners of her mouth.

"A heart of gold," said Roger Patcham, looking after her, "a heart of gold, and as wilful as a witch withal. I wonder, now, what new whimsie she has tucked away in her brain. Something mad, I'll wager, and yet with a salting of wit to season it."

Roger Patcham had no need to nurse his curiosity for the full week. There were still two days of the time to run when Denise came to him as he was going his rounds. He was in the men's day-room handling one by one, as was his wont, the pikes that stood in sockets along the wall, their heads swung in leather loops nailed to the wooden cornice. This he did at uncertain intervals, and woe to him whose weapon showed lack of care. In Captain Patcham's eye

peace was no excuse to the sloven. It was a place to which Denise went but seldom, and as she entered the loud buzz of gossip ceased, cards, dice, and what not were pushed aside, and all rose to their feet in silence.

A mixed crew they were, and a strange babble of many jargons they made when their tongues were in full swing—French, Flemings, Walloons, English, Swiss, Italians; many races, but all picked men who had eaten Lhoeac's bread for years, and who, every soul of them, would have tramped down the valley of the shadow with no more than a second thought rather than that the beginnings of its chill should fall upon their young mistress.

"Come out into the sunshine, Father Roger," said Denise, with a nod and a smile round the room. "What? Thou art on duty? Why, so am I, and mine takes precedence. Fie! to say no to a woman! Thou saidst nothing! What have I eyes for? not to read looks? Come, *mon ami*, that whim of mine is ripe, and thou must aid in its harvesting."

Linking her arm in his, she drew him, half-pleased, half-reluctant, out upon the terrace to the shady side of the Château, and there, still leaning upon him, she marched him twice up and down in silence.

"Art thou going to be good to me, Father Roger?" she said at last, pressing his elbow to her side, and looking up at him playfully. "Yes, I know thou art. Thy moustache hath an upward curl! Didst thou know that was a sign of benevolence?"

When it turns down, so, we poor women go softly and pray for quietness."

"I know you are a wilful maid, Mademoiselle, and that I am an old fool when you so choose, but I do not know what lies behind all this talk."

"It is such a good thing, this thought of mine, Father Roger ; and yet a girl's thoughts and a man's are not alike, and of course it is always we who are astray. When a man and a maid differ it is never the maid who has wisdom—or so the man thinks. How many crowns a year is Meluzza worth ?"

"Less than it costs," answered Roger grimly, for the up-keep of this Italian windfall, this far-off fief of Lhoeac, was a sore point with him. "How can we at Lhoeac have eyes here to watch the outgoings ?"

"Yes, but how much comes in ? Never heed what goes out."

"A woman all the world over ! 'Never heed what goes out.' But we must heed the outgoings, else if the leak at the spigot wastes more than comes in at the bung the cask will run dry. 'Never heed the outgoings,' quoth she. A woman's way, that ; a woman's way that !"

"If it were not that I have a point to gain I would tell thee, Father Roger, that to give no straight answer is like a man all the world over," cried Denise, with a stamp of her foot. "Drop a man's way and answer me. For the third time, how much comes in ?"

"Seven hundred crowns, maybe ; maybe eight. It should be twice, aye, even thrice as much, but who is there to check waste and the master a hundred and fifty leagues away ?"

"So! As much as that? Then Caterina can grow fat at her leisure."

"Caterina ?"

"Caterina, Father Roger, Caterina. Is it a man's way to be deaf? That she should have Meluzza is my whim."

"And did I not say it would be some mad thought?" and Roger Patcham laughed aloud. "What, Madame leave you after all these years? Not for ten Meluzzas. 'Tis plain you know her but little, Mademoiselle."

"Madame? Who said aught of Madame? I said Caterina. Madame will bide at Lhoeac with me."

"Caterina here alone? Poor lamb! Luigi di Gadola, who has once so nearly made a meal of her, would gobble both her and Meluzza in a mouthful, once our backs were turned."

"Not alone," answered Denise, with a twinkle in her eyes, "but with Messire Carlo Perego as shepherd; and my word for it, not six wolves like Luigi di Gadola will harm either the lamb or the fold, if I know Messire Carlo as I think I do."

"Carlo Perego!" cried Captain Patcham. "Carlo Perego! What hath he to do with Caterina?"

"Father Roger, thou art, I doubt not, very wise in

the ways of men, and especially when at odds with them ; thou canst plot, thou canst baffle, thou canst fight, thou canst trounce ; but in our ways thou art an owl, a mole, a bat. Why, for five days the wench hath had no life but the little left in Messire Carlo Perego ; and as for him, I think his one sorrow is that he did not die for her out and out. Presently he, being a man, will change, and his one sorrow will be his one joy, since to live for a woman is better than to die for her, even though there be less of nobility in it. Now, Father Roger, what dost thou think of my whim ? ”

“ If—— ” he began.

But with a laugh Denise cut him short.

“ *Merci !* Monsieur,” said she, dropping his arm. “ If your difficulty be a doubt, that settles it, since there is no room for so much as the ghost of an if ; ” and with a mock curtesy she ran singing into the house.

“ Heart of gold,” said Roger, watching her as she went. “ Did I not say there would be some wisdom in her madness ? A sure friend and a safe retreat this side of the mountains is no bad thing, lest my Lord Bishop climb so high that he overshadow Lhocac and so chill us all in the north. God grant her second whim be as wise a one.”

But when, later, he questioned her, his heart sank at the reply.

“ It is,” said she, meeting his gaze with eyes as grave as his own, “ that when next my uncle Henri

says 'come' I shall be a loving and obedient niece, and so please both him and myself. If there is a truer philosophy of life, I have yet to learn it."

"Then may he never say it," answered Patcham; "and if that be philosophy, then it is not the first philosophy that has had but little wisdom. As I told you before, so again now, the air of Bordeaux is unwholesome for Lhoeac."

Whereat Denise laughed.

"He, at least," said she, "has thriven on it; why not I?"

II

Fourteen months in which the evil thereof is sufficient for the day are ample to make a man forget his fears for the time to come. Such a fourteen months it was which followed on the return to Lhoeac. Never before in Roger Patcham's time had so much of trouble fallen upon the Seigneurie, so much of anxiety beset its management. Drought and flood sowed the seeds of blight, and the harvest was disease and famine. Ergot spread in the corn, mildew burnt and shrivelled the vines, so that the ears of the one were black and blasted and the fruit of the other ruined; tempest swept the thin fields, twisting and laying the weakened straw; and upon all these again came floods, rotting the poor produce that remained.

Well was it then for Lhoeac that a thrifty hand had laid by in store against the evil day. Had the old order lingered on as it lingered at La Crête or Terre-Seche, the order of a stern and callous gathering on the one hand, and a reckless, arrogant scattering on the other, the order of the upper and the nether millstone, Lhoeac's vassals must have starved as theirs starved. But the years of peace and carefulness had brought their accumulations whether of money or of money's worth to the vaults and granaries of the Château, and with all his love for Denise de Lhoeac, Roger Patcham was no man to see her peasants die by their empty hearths that she might one day fill her lap with wealth. As well fill it with the blood of men.

Therefore through the desperate hardness of the flooded spring, when every low-lying field, whether vineyard, corn, or pasture, was no better than a morass ; when the brimming rivers overlapped their banks and set the very villages a-wash ; on through the sudden scorching heat of early summer, when the tardy growth, already stunted and starved with cold, crisped and withered in the hot glare or grew into a premature and meagre ripeness ; and with that most terrible time of all when the little of hope that remained perished in disease, blight, and the outpouring of the vials of the skies, Roger Patcham drew with a careful but no niggard hand on what was to have been the wealth of Lhoeac's mistress. For months he fed, doled, nursed, and then the

crisis passed. The Seigneurie had its life whole within it, but the Château was swept bare both in coffer and storehouse.

"A cheap purchase," said Roger Patcham, looking with a clear eye to the future; "a very cheap purchase. If but the love of the people be bought as well as their lives, Mademoiselle Denise can fill her barns at her leisure and none will grumble. At last I think we have peace," and even as he said it the messenger of my Lord Bishop of Saint-Seurin was knocking at the great gate. He bore two letters, one to his well-beloved niece, suave and tender—nay, almost more than paternally warm; the other to Master Roger Patcham, curtly courteous as became his great station and the other's obscurity, but pithy and to the point. My Lord Bishop was no man to lavish words when there was nought to gain thereby, or indeed to lavish anything on such terms. With him a groat that failed to earn a crown was at poor usury. Of the two, the latter first, and it was none the less like Henri de Lhoeac that in its tone of familiar condescension it savoured more of Louis the Twelfth than of a provincial bishop.

"TO MASTER ROGER PATCHAM : Greeting.

"We have heard, even in Bordeaux, how nobly thou hast played the Seigneur this year past. Truly we and Lhoeac are in thy debt even beyond the sixteen thousand crowns which now come to me out of the loving thought of my dear lord and

brother. Alas! that the poverty of the church, and the crying needs of the poor, compel us to require that our brother's bounty be now forthcoming.

"Thy friend,

"HENRI DE LIBOURNE ET DE SAINT-SEURIN.

"If thou wouldst cut the claim in half, see that Mademoiselle, my niece, says yes to the thing I seek. Have no fear for her well-being."

At the first spelling over—Henri de Lhoeac wrote no clerkly hand, and for this letter he was his own secretary—Roger Patcham took in little more than the words, but as the sense came home to him at the second reading he sat back in his chair with a troubled face.

"Sixteen thousand crowns! Aye, that was true, and yet in his absorbed thought for Lhoeac it had been clean forgotten. Sixteen thousand crowns! Where was he to find sixteen thousand crowns for my Lord Bishop or my Lord Bishop's poor? though the two, no doubt, were one. Not from the Seigneurie. When life and bone are alone left it is a fool's hunt to look for flesh and blood. Not from Lhoeac. Its coffers had little in them but dust and the echo of vanished wealth. A half he might raise by pinching and scraping; a bare half, but no more—no, not by a denier. Where, then, get the rest? Not from the Jews. That was to give Lhoeac up to be sucked dry year by year, and the bare husk filched at the last. He had played the Seigneur

nobly, had he? Honey with a sting left in it! That was my Lord Bishop's biting sarcasm. Better he had played it with a closer fist, and as the old lords would have played it, for now Lhoeac was like to pay high for the saving of Lhoeac. A benefit may be bought too dear!"

"It is like this," said Roger Patcham, sitting bunched in his chair with knitted brows, thinking aloud as some men do in their harassment, "I can pay him half, and for want of the whole he will set himself here and lord it as he will, and who can say him nay? The work of twenty years gone in a finger-snap. And for what? That a score or two of peasants may live a score or two of years. Saints! but it's a dear purchase when one reckons in Henri de Lhoeac! Fool that I was to have forgotten Henri de Lhoeac. Twenty years he has waited, and now when the pear is ripe he shakes the tree and——! But what of this? Cut the claim in half? Peste! How well my Lord Bishop knows the affairs of Lhoeac! Truly he is well served, though if I but knew who is traitor Monseigneur de Saint-Seurin would have prompt need for a new tool. The Seigneur would be played right nobly once more, and the fellow should hang! A shrewd, priestly stroke that! Cut the claim in half!" and the Englishman smiled grimly. "'Tis a bribe plainly enough, but a bribe that soils no palm in the taking, since Lhoeac would be the gainer. He knew better than to say, 'Roger Patcham, put eight

thousand crowns in thy pouch ;' and—aye, here comes Mademoiselle. With her there is little beating about the bush, and five minutes will make it aye or nay. I pray to the Lord the thing he seeks can be done with some kind of conscience."

At the sound of the quick rush of feet down the corridor Roger Patcham pushed the letter out of sight. That the politic prelate would say nought about it in his epistle to her he was sure, and for all his own bluntness he was man enough to wish to do with a seeming grace that which, perchance, he needs must do, though he had no grace at all.

"My whim, Father Roger!" cried Denise, flinging the curtains aside with one hand while the other waved a paper in the air. "You have thought, it may be, that a woman's memory and a woman's will would not last a twelvemonth, but it is as I told you. My uncle says 'come' and—and—we shall go, shall we not, Father Roger? 'Tis my whim, you know, and you were warned."

After all, she was no more than a child, this Denise of twenty years. Over more than four hundred square miles her word was law; and ready to her hand fifty men drew pay to back her will, without troubling their conscience as to the right or the wrong. Within the four lines of Lhoeac no soul owned stick or stone, hoof or feather, wife or child: nay, not even himself except at her pleasure. High and low justice to all their cruellest and most arbitrary extremes were hers of here-

ditary right, woman as she was, for no Salic law touched Lhoeac ; and save for the rights of the King she was as unquestioned within her Seigneurie as Anne of Brittany in her Duchy. Let a peasant thief, she could hang him ; let him kill her deer, she could maim at the wrist ; let him curse her for her misused power, and she could leave him to rot in prison and fling wife and child out upon the road to starve. She could slay, torture, tax, crush, and no law would interpose a finger to stop her. All that she knew, for Roger Patcham was an upright man and had schooled her well, both in her powers and the duties which sprang from them ; and yet, knowing that she had but to say " I will " and so make an end, she linked her arm in that of the grizzled Captain and begged of his love that which she could have commanded. As for Messire Roger, the pressure of her arm made my Lord Bishop's letter creak under his doublet, and with two such voices pleading, what could he do but consent.

" Wilt thou read it ? " said Denise when she had thanked him as honestly as if her pleasuring had been his thought and not his necessity ; " it is the prettiest letter that ever came to Lhoeac. Thou art to come, and *ma mie Maman*, so that I may not fret ; and I shall be guest or play at mistress as it pleases me. It will be the first, I think ; it would daunt me to rule my lord's great household. Yet there is a touch of sorrow through its prettiness. ' Are we not the last of our race, we two, ' saith he, ' and he far

gone in years?' I had not thought a man could write so tenderly. He must have a noble heart, this little-known uncle of mine ; and such a great life is his—to live for the Lord Christ. And, oh, thou art to bring any half-dozen of our men thou wilt : 'Needs must,' saith he again, 'that Denise de Lhoeac have her train of honour !' Hark to that, Father Roger ! Fancy clattering through the streets of Bordeaux with half a dozen hammering at our heels. 'Room, there, room for Queen Denise the First !' " With as grave a face as her dancing eyes would permit, she swept Captain Patcham such a curtesy that would have passed muster with Anne of France herself.

"Read it at thy leisure," she went on, dropping the paper on to his knees, "and see if it is not as sweet a letter as thou hast ever read. Now I will go and frighten *ma mie Maman*. *Chere Maman !* how she will hate Bordeaux, and how I shall love it !" Pausing at the doorway, Denise looked back across her shoulder. "Meluzza freed her from one plague ; who knows what blessing Bordeaux may have in store for her ?"

Dropping the curtain with a laugh that ended in a snatch of song, she left Roger Patcham to his reflections. Nor, for all the sharp edge of his suspicion, could he find fault with Monseigneur's letter. It was all it ought to be, and no more ; frank, affectionate, playful, and yet as Denise had said, with a touch of pathos that was not unnatural from the aged, unknown uncle to the young girl last of his

blood—a pathos that did as much honour to his heart as the letter to Roger Patcham did to his head. An ideal letter, the Englishman would have thought, but for the shadows which the past cast upon its lines.

“Trust Henri de Lhoeac no further than the length of your little finger,” the old Seigneur had said to him. But was it really trusting? Was there any venture of faith at all in this visit? any straining of caution? Six men and himself, Madame Catherine and the girl’s own women all about her—with these at her right hand and at her left there was little of trust needed.

“And,” said he, stretching himself, “’tis the girl’s whim, and for good or bad there’s an end of it.”

But for all her eagerness it was three weeks before Denise saw the greatest sight of her twenty years of life. Maman Catherine was feminine to her fingernails, and so not to be hurried over such grave matters as the plenishing of wardrobes. There would be gaieties at the palace of my Lord Bishop, and the heiress of Lhoeac must needs make a brave show, to say nought of the dignity and grandeur of Mademoiselle’s chaperon. Nor, upon his part, could Messire Patcham scrape together eight thousand crowns at a day’s warning; so between the two the girl was at her wits’ end with impatience.

“What matters a dress or a cloak or a laced petticoat more or less?” she said petulantly to

Captain Roger. "'Tis myself my uncle wants, and not a milliner's block."

But with his own ends in view Roger shook his head.

"Bide a while, my bird, and you will sing another tune. A pretty woman is like a fine picture, all the better for being well framed. It's little thanks you would give Madame Catherine if she saved you a week's fret now at the cost of a month's heart-burning later on. A month's? Nay, a whole lifetime's! To be the grey mouse at Lhoeac, where all are mice and all are grey is well enough, but I'll warrant you will change your mind when the sharp-clawed lady cats of Saint-Seurin get hunting you."

Which shows that in spite of his bewilderment at times, Roger Patcham had at least taken his first lesson in the ways of women. But the sorrows of the three weeks could at worst make them no longer than three weeks, and once fairly upon the road they were forgotten.

"Truly a great city is the most wonderful thing in the world!" said Denise, as with flushed face and restless eyes she rode along the quays of Bordeaux, and turned in at the Porte des Salinières. "*Mon Dieu!* What walls! How dared the English so much as come within sight of them! One, two, three, four towers from that angle, then this great gate, and, oh! oh! oh! the turrets beyond are past counting! What a famished nation yours

must be, Father Roger, when nothing less than this would stay its hunger ! ”

“Sharp teeth and a strong stomach go far,” answered Roger, swelling his leanness with pride and satisfaction, “and it took more than Bordeaux, aye, more than Guienne itself, to take the whet off the appetite. But that is dead and gone. Let it rest, Mademoiselle, lest some hot-headed fool pay off a nation’s debt on the body of one man and leave Lhoec and me alike the poorer by a life—a thing mighty inconvenient for either of us to spare just now ! ”

That Denise should cry out was no marvel, since it was her first sight of a great city. Hitherto Assier, Saint Agnes, or Puyrac, the villages of the Seigneurie, one double tortuous row of houses with three or four sprawling lanes to the side, had been her largest knowledge of life in the bunch, except perhaps a petty town on the way to or from Meluzza. Riding to Italy, Roger Patcham had kept to the by-ways, giving Toulouse, Nimes, Avignon, and the like a wide berth.

Bordeaux, therefore, with its great turreted walls, its castles, towers, markets, palaces, churches, its shipping along the thronged quay-side, its tramp and stir and rollicking hum of life, its wilderness of streets, its ebb and flow of varied interests ; its wealth and magnificence, poverty and meanness, all crowding, jostling, shouldering one another, were a revelation. The shipping alone was a nine-days’

astonishment to one who knew no larger craft than a toy boat on a brook or a walnut-shell set adrift on a pond, and thrice as she rode past the four turrets on her left Denise had hindered the traffic that she might closer watch the gay flags, the flapping sails, the sailors shouting and singing as they leaned across the yards at what seemed the peril of their lives or busied themselves with the maze of cordage.

"See," said Roger Patcham, his eyes kindling with a fire as bright as her own. "There and there and there, aye, and half a dozen times more, the bonny red cross of Saint George. 'Tis another set of teeth where with England gobbles Bordeaux nowadays, but, my faith, it fills the stomach all the same, and the feast leaves less of an ache behind it! God be praised that I have seen the brave flag once again. The sight of it makes my heart leap and my blood hot, and if there were kin of mine left behind the white cliffs I think yon fluttering patches would woo me home. Yon blue and white is a Portingal; nearer by two is the Spanish rag, yellow and red in a kind of jaundiced rage. Further, by the stairway is a lumbering Fleming, with bows like a butter-boat, but yet a lad that gains his end with not overmuch of a 'by your leave.' Of the rest, two or three are Rochellais, and the balance, flag or no flag, are English. That they show no colour is their affair, and nine times out of ten, whether by sea or by land, with prince, priest, or peasant, there is no wisdom like caution. Come, Mademoiselle, let us

make forward. We have blocked the current till there is a back-wash behind us like that of a choked stream. Look to yourselves there in front, look to yourselves. Pull back thy barrow a foot or two, my friend, lest you gall the beast and suffer for it ; and thou, keep thy vile hides more to the lee. Whew ! theystink like—— Beware of yon cask, Mademoiselle ! The fellow must be as full as his own staves to trundle it so wildly, clean under the beast's feet. My word, but four legs is the nobler animal of the two ! This way, this way ;" and turning to the left, Roger Patcham rode under the grey gateway with his troop straggling a furlong behind him. But once within the narrow street beyond the gate, he bade the escort close up.

" Ride smarter men," he cried sharply, "and more like men than meal-bags. Would you have all Bordeaux on the giggle at us for greenhorn bumpkins ? Now forward, and at a trot."

From the throat of the narrow street, cunningly contracted so that it might the better dominate the approach to the gate, they passed on to the broader road which had at one time been the fosse of the ancient city, but from which there now sprang a teeming network of busy streets and evil-smelling laneways. To the right were the old walls that had stood since the days of Saint Louis, the great gate leading to the market rising at the centre in a series of turrets. Past these they rode, Saint Eloi's spire on the left ; past the great marble cross that split the

traffic at the upper end of the street ; then, still skirting the old town, to the right under the shadow of the Château du Hà, built by Charles the Seventh to overawe his trusty and well-beloved lieges, through an antique gateway, black with time and worn with war ; obliquely, still to the right, past the Cathedral of Saint André and so out to the western fosse. Thence, leaving the ruins of the Palais de Tutelle on the right, it was no more than a three minutes' trot to the Rue Saint Germain.

Once there, Roger Patcham checked his horse to a walk.

"Yonder," said he, pointing ahead, "is the palace of my Lord Bishop."

"And thou, in thy cleverness, hast brought us straight as a homing pigeon," cried Denise.

"Cleverness ?" he answered sourly. "As to cleverness, the less said of that the better. I have ever heard that to get into a web was a simpler matter than to get out again, and here we are !"

III

For thirteen days Denise had queened it in the hotel of Monseigneur de Saint-Seurin. Mistress and guest in one, as he had promised, she had in these thirteen days seen much of that which is accounted the greatness of this world as well as the glory of the service of the next, but always, as he was careful to

contrive, with my Lord Bishop the centre of the greatness and the glory.

Was it some solemn ecclesiastical ceremony in the collegiate church of Saint-Seurin beyond the walls—a ceremony in which the solemnity revealed rather than obscured the pomp and grandeur of the sacerdotal functions? Then of natural course the noble and commanding personality of Monseigneur was the focus of observation. Gorgeous in his symbolic vestments, gracious in his grave dignity, unctuous, benign, reverent, he was the thrice bright sun round which all revolved, and to Denise the worship and the purpose of the whole were lost in a growing awe of the individual greatness of this new-found uncle—an effect which might have been not foreign to his purpose and not uncalculated upon. If it was life in its gayer mood—and who in all Bordeaux knew as did Monseigneur the value of both worlds?—it was to her but another revelation of perfection. Thrice in these thirteen days had he held receptions in the palace, to her honour and his own glorification, and thrice in all the thronging crowds of notables, peers, prelates, and politicals, there was none who outshone him; and Bordeaux, with its separate parliament and half-independent government, held itself in wit, wealth, and culture to be but little short of the glory of Paris. Indeed a good Bordelaise would have reversed the precedence without a questioning qualm. Then it was dressed almost with a severe plainness,

wearing neither jewel nor ornament save the cross upon his breast, and never, as was the common custom of the day, secularising the priest by dragging down the eternal world to the pettiness of the temporal, that Monseigneur was still the centre of attraction and a marvel to more than Roger Patcham.

To the first of these receptions Captain Roger had gone with his tongue in his cheek.

"Now," said he to himself, "comes Mademoiselle's disillusion, and not a day too soon. Let my Lord Bishop forget his years and calling as men say he does and, my word for it, Mademoiselle Denise will close her open mouth with a snap. Let him shock her reverence for religion, and that for which religion stands, and his day is done. For such an offence not even the last of the Lhoeacs could earn forgiveness!"

But the expected did not happen, and Roger Patcham went to his bed that night a troubled and a thoughtful man. The waters over which they sailed were deeper than he fathomed, and Henri de Lhoeac must indeed have a heavy issue at stake when he so suddenly and completely gave his past the lie. Nor was that all. Thenceforward, both within the palace and without, Monseigneur saw to it that the Englishman's bewilderment and alarm had good cause for growth. Abroad at home he was the same grave, benign, and reprehensive prelate, and day by day Denise de Lhoeac felt

fully under the spell of a life which, without austerity or ostentation, revealed a spirit that in wisdom, power, and rectitude was on a plane apart from all her knowledge of life. Had he dared, Roger Patcham would have hinted a warning, but in her then mood a warning would have been a slander, and so have set a yet keener edge upon her admiration. Few things quicken reverence like the defending of the thing revered against an unjustified attack.

Almost daily he had sought to rid himself of old Guy de Lhoeac's legacy, but invariably had been put aside with an evasion. Monseigneur was at his devotions; Monseigneur was in conference with the Duke of This, or the Lord of That; Monseigneur's almoner was elsewhere; until at last, meeting Monseigneur in the central courtyard, Roger Patcham bluntly said that it had been no easy matter to gather in eight thousand crowns, and now it seemed as hard to be quit of them. Whereupon Monsieur de Saint-Seurin turned upon him smartly.

"Eight thousand crowns? So thou art at last wise in this generation, Master Patcham? Well, the paying of them can wait the issue of thy goodwill. That, thou wilt remember, was the essence of the bargain," and rounded on his heel as if the last word was said.

But Bishop or no Bishop, Roger, being deadly in earnest, caught him by the sleeve.

"And why wait, my lord?" he cried. "Is my good-will not proved? The thing you desired is done, and Mademoiselle is here in Bordeaux."

"Bordeaux?" echoed Monseigneur, wrenching himself free and going on his way unconcernedly. "Who said aught of Bordeaux?"

All of which, and remembering my Lord Bishop's growing power with Denise, made Captain Roger tremble for Lhoëac.

The Hotel de Saint-Seurin was a huge block with a depth equal to its frontage; that is to say, it stood about square upon its foundations. A broad doorway, within which was a porter's lodge, opened upon the street-level, and gave access to a sidelong flight of stone steps. At the head of these was a second door of immense strength, its five inches of oak planks being ribbed and studded with iron. This, in turn, gave upon the hall, which at the further side opened upon a square courtyard five stories deep, and bordered by tier on tier of pillared galleries, the cloister walks of my Lord Bishop in his new-born moods of holy meditation. On the fourth storey, opening off the gallery and remote from the turmoil of the world, as was fitting for such a place, was Monseigneur's study.

Of all the rooms in the palace which Denise had visited—and being free of the house there were few places where her curiosity had not carried her—this one alone struck her with a chill. In spite of the littered table which filled its centre,

the manuscripts, the parchments, the duodecimo classics of Aldo Manuzio upon the shelves on two sides of the room, the upright writing-desk placed in true student fashion where the light came in softly from the left, it lacked for her that strange and subtle life-likeness to its master which is the inalienable heritage of all much-used and well-beloved four walls. Let the room be in a palace or a hovel, let it be a prison cell or an open booth on the wind-swept brow of a hill, and so sure as the space has walls it will in time absorb in some measure his personality. In Monseigneur's study the shell was there, but the hundred accretions of a score of years were absent.

That much was dimly in her mind as, on the thirteenth day of her stay in Bordeaux, she sat by the end of the disordered table while Henri de Lhoac, his hands clasped behind his back, paced the dingy room in an interval of silence.

"It is seventy years, my daughter," he said at last, picking up the broken thread of his monologue, "seventy years since a maid of France saved France, and lost herself in the saving. Surely, surely, to every true soul it is a beggarly loss for so great a gain. The pity of it is that the glory comes so rarely and to so few. But it does come, it does come, for now, how can I tell you in few and fitting words that Christendom stands in as urgent need of salvation as France did then, and that a maid of France can be the power under

heaven to turn the destinies of this world, and out of evil bring righteousness—a greater glory, a greater greatness by so much as Christendom surpasses France?”

He ceased his walk as he commenced speaking, and kneeling one knee upon the chair drawn before the table by which she sat, he bent towards her, his brows down drawn and his face full of a solemn gravity.

“Christendom!” he went on, with an upward gesture in the air, a note of pain breaking sharply through the measured deliberation of his speech. “Is not the word almost now a mockery? A Borgia throned in the sacred chair of Peter; the abomination of desolation standing where it ought not to stand, a service of devils profaning the holy things of the church, offences unnatural and unnameable flaunted unblushingly in the face of an outraged world! The shame of it; oh! the shame of it! and if the fountain-head be evil, what shall the waters be but polluted and accursed even to their furthest limits? Not Guienne, not France alone, but all of God Almighty’s world, groans under the tyranny of wrong; and from the Head of the Church upon earth to the meanest monk lying and thieving to glut his appetite, the flock of Christ is ravaged by those who are its shepherds. Oh! the shame of it, the bitter shame of it! I say again; the torture, the anguish, to stand by and see this illimitable power

of evil sweep these million souls to an eternal perdition. To see it, to know it, to suffer for it, and yet to be impotent ! Ah ! my God, yes, yes ; here lies the sting ; to be impotent ! ”

As he spoke his voice quickened and took fire, his eyes glowed, he braced and stretched himself as a man does who faces danger, conscious but unafraid ; and to the rapt gaze of Denise it seemed as if the solemn face turned down to hers was swept with a sorrow that passed beyond the common agonies of earth. But at the last the lids closed over the eager eyes, and his voice broke and died away. Courage, righteous wrath, enthusiasm, were overborne with hopelessness ; the devil upon earth was too strong for the powers that faced him. But the dejection was not for long. Suddenly he woke into new life, passed his hand across his forehead with a quick gesture, and drawing himself erect, threw off his weakness.

“ Illimitable ? Impotent ? ” he went on, his voice ringing clear and full. “ Nay, nay, that were unfaith ; that were sacrilege ; that were to doubt God. Even as He raised up a maid to save France so will He raise up a maid to save His holy church ; and thou, Denise, thou art she.”

“ I, my father, I ? ”

Denise had sat with her hands folded in her lap, listening intently to his every word, her face reflecting his moods as a pool the blue and the cloud of the sky above it ; now, grasping the sides of the

chair, she thrust herself forward as if to follow him as he drew back.

"How can this thing be?"

"Thus. Do as has been done. Follow Joan of Arc, who gave herself and counted the cost but light."

"Myself? But how, but how? Can I take sword in hand against so great an evil? But that is foolishness, for this—this is——"

"No, daughter, no. This warfare is not against flesh and blood. Nevertheless victory cometh through the gift of thyself."

"To death?"

"Not so; to life, rather; to that which is the natural course for Denise de Lhoeac. To marriage."

"Marriage, my lord?" and her face flushed.

"You speak mysteries."

"Listen, and let us reason this calmly. From whence must regeneration come—from above or from below? from the brain or from the feet? from that which guides or from that which is led? from the chair of Saint Peter or from that which, after all, is that upon which the church stands—the ignorant mass of the people? Is there room for question? Truly, no. Regeneration must come from above; he who seeks to regenerate from below fails, for it is not a new birth, but revolution. Follow me now. The world is weary of the enormity of this Borgia and groans for deliverance. His cup of iniquity is full to overflowing. Long,

long has God stood waiting in the shadows until the times were ripe, and of late His arm hath moved. I think—I think I see the sword of Justice poised to strike. A year may pass, two years even, since God's mercy is long-suffering, then the sword shall fall. Borgia must go to his own place. What then? This. Let there be set in the vacant chair a man whose life shall be an atonement for the present pollution of holy things, a man of piety, foresight, wisdom, prudence, and indomitable will; a man who will count no abnegation, no sacrifice, no labour too great if but the church be purified and set anew upon its divine mission of peace upon earth and the bringing near to man of the glory of God. Let such a one be set there, I say; and could there be a more fitting end for the last of the line of Lhoeac?"

"Thou, thou, thou?"

"I, daughter, I. God works through men, and happy is he who seeks to fit himself to the hand of the worker. Nay, more than that; woe, woe, bitter, eternal, unutterable woe to him who shrinks from the appointed service."

"But, my lord, a moment since you spoke of me. My mind is in a maze. How can I——?"

"Thus. Will the College of Cardinals—God works through men, I said—will it know anything of the obscure Bishop of Saint-Seurin? Truly, no. A man must have his stand near the steps of a throne before one will lift him into the seat. Let

the Bishop of Saint-Seurin but be named one of the Sacred College, and—oh, aye, I know there are those already who turn their eyes to France and whisper that George of Amboise is the ideal Pope. Well, I quarrel with no man's opinions in such a matter, but let Henry of Lhoeac but fairly measure himself with George of Amboise, and by the Lord God! I have no fear for the issue. Saint-Seurin will overshadow Rouen. Here comes in your part."

The voluble rush of words slackened. My Lord Bishop had reached a point in his argument when it behoved him to pick his way with circumspection. Bombast, a flood of vague assertions, a torrent of generalities no longer served his purpose, and for a moment he paused, dropping his lids so that his eyes were no wider than the rim of a franc-piece.

"La Clazonnè—the old lord that is—will do that for a kinsman which he will not do for a stranger; and through La Clazonnè Alexander the Sixth will do that—not knowing what he does—which makes Henri de Lhoeac his successor."

"I do not understand."

"It is like this."

From the table by which he stood de Lhoeac lifted a roll of parchment, one of a pile that might have been laid there for the purpose, and set it on end. Six inches away he set another, and yet another, each a half-inch longer than that which

preceded it, until he had five stretching in a line across the table. Then he flipped the one nearest him with his forefinger, tilting it against its neighbour, which it overthrew, flinging it against the next, until the last was toppled over.

"Now is it clear? What I mean is this. La Clazonnè can move Peter of Giè, who can move La Tremoille, who can move Cæsar Borgia, who can move the Pope. For the Bishop of Saint-Seurin La Clazonnè will stir no finger. Why should he? There are a hundred bishops in France. But for the man who, through his son, Giles La Clazonnè, is kinsman to his house he will move Giè, since thenceforward Lhoeac and La Clazonnè will be one. Our ends are different, but we must use men as we find them. For him it is the glory of Lhoeac reflected on La Clazonnè; for us it is the regeneration of the world, the purification of Christendom, the bringing near of God's mercy to men. Daughter, the time is short, and such things are not done in a day."

"But"—and the face that looked up to his was a very troubled face; she yearned to do the right if ever a soul did, but what was right was not clear—"I am but a girl, and ignorant. Let me have time to think."

"He who setteth his hand to the plough and turneth back is not worthy of Me. He who loveth houses and lands more than Me is not worthy of Me. Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His

righteousness, for what profiteth the world if the soul be a castaway ? ”

“ No, no,” she cried, laying her hand suddenly upon his sleeve. “ Let him have Lhoeac and be content. It is—— You spoke of marriage, my lord ; and to me marriage without love is sacrilege.”

“ And so the service of God Almighty is to be left undone because His ways are not ours ! Are you so steeped in provincialism that you do not know what befits the honour of a gentleman ? La Clazonnè will befriend a kinsman but do nought for a bribe. There is no other course, daughter.”

“ Let me think, let me think—give me to-night. Twelve hours—twelve hours out of a lifetime are not much. Oh ! it is not right to put so cruel a choice before a girl and leave her no time for thought.”

“ Therefore do I choose for you, I who understand. And have I not thought—saints ! have I not thought ? Aye, through the vigil of a hundred nights’ praying, fasting, weeping ! See, daughter : this Giles La Clazonnè is a soldier wedded to camps. I will vouch for it that he seeks no more from you than a marriage in name.”

“ Will he set his oath to that, my lord ? and is he a man who, having sworn, will keep his plight ? ”

“ He will swear, have no fear for that. No, nor for his faith. What ? Would I sacrifice you to a wastrel ?—I, your uncle and God’s minister. La

Clazonnè is as proper a man in mind, spirit, and body as there is in all Guienne."

"What?" answered Denise, with a sneer; "and yet he can stoop to such a bargain as this!"

"A man's ways are not a girl's ways; but what he swears to he will hold to. As for thee, daughter, how many thousand holy nuns are there in this France of ours, and what will this life of thine be worse than theirs? Nay, it will be wider, fuller, nobler; unfettered, uncramped, in the world and yet not of the world; mistress of Lhoeac——"

"Aye," she broke in with a start, "what of Lhoeac? It may be I can do what I will with myself, but Lhoeac must not suffer. That were treason."

"Nor shall it. Lhoeac, rather, is the gainer, and had Lhoeac a voice, Lhoeac would bid you do as I bid you; nay, as the truth bids you. Sooner or later thou wouldst marry some lord of Brittany, Artois, Picardy, or the like, who, howsoever he loved thee, would have no love for Lhoeac, since north is north and south is south, and the two are no more one than the bitter of an orange-rind and the sweet of its juice. Now, Lhoeac is bound up in the same bundle as La Clazonnè. The boundaries that before met will now merge, and so through union Lhoeac will be the stronger. A blessed strength and a needful, believe me; for I foresee that in the time to come the King from above will draw towards the people from beneath,

and whatsoever of weakness lies between will be ground to powder. The feeble lordships will go, but have no fear for Lhoeac if it is once linked with Clazonnè."

"Every way I am answered, and yet for all the answering it is abhorrent. When must this thing be?"

"Giles La Clazonnè is in Bordeaux, and—the time is short, too short if God's justice is not held back."

"But," said Denise, clasping and unclasping her hands in her uncertainty and distress, a movement that was a trick of hers. "There are conditions."

"Make them, my daughter."

"It must be secret."

"La Clazonnè accepts the condition."

"He must be bound as you yourself have said."

"He shall be bound."

"Lhoeac shall be mine in fact as well as name, so long at least as the old lord lives."

"La Clazonnè agrees."

"If this—this—Giles La Clazonnè dies before his father, Lhoeac shall be mine, as it is now, mine without question or quibble."

"That he may object to."

"Monseigneur, I must protect my people as best I can. While I live no stranger shall be set over them. As I said, it would be treason."

"Well, be it so; I will see to it that he accept

that condition also. Are these all ? To-night, then, and I shall provide safe witnesses."

"To-night ?" she cried, aghast ; "but I must have time to prepare."

"What ? Preparations, and the thing a secret ? To-night, Denise, to-night ; there is neither need nor room for delay."

"Oh !" she answered, rising from her chair, glamoured by these thirteen days of strange life, mystified, swept off her mind's balance by his vehemence and ready flood of words. "Truly either God is with you in this thing, or He has let loose the powers of evil, for you meet me at every point."

At the door she turned.

"One more condition. I will not see his face nor shall he see mine. For all my consent, I am ashamed. Tell him that, Monseigneur."

"That, too, shall be as you will ; but I take it that your word is pledged ?"

"Yes," answered she, slowly, "it is pledged."

"And freely ?"

"It is pledged ; let that suffice."

Left to himself, Henri de Lhoeac drew a long breath.

"I think," said he, drawing his chair up to the writing-table and leaning his head upon a crook'd elbow, "that we two, dear brother Guy, are quits at last. I was as good as dead, I had no part or lot in Lhoeac ; nay, I was an outcast from its borders,

and kept beyond its bounds by a penalty. Well, there is no pear so slow of ripening but it falls at the last. By the Mass! but it was harder to win the jade than I had dreamed, yet won she is, and who knows but I have told her no lie. Let George of Amboise see to himself!"

THE HOUSE OF DEATH

I

IT was a strange ceremony and such a one as had not often been seen in Bordeaux, the marriage of Denise de Lhoeac in Monseigneur's private chapel that October night. The celebrant was my Lord Bishop himself, clad in all the magnificence of his official vestments, but for once he served the altar without an acolyte. His word was pledged for secrecy, and save for the presence of three witnesses, tried friends and followers, only those concerned were within the consecrated walls. Therefore, in the unwonted emptiness of the church, and the small stir of life about the altar, the scene was strange.

Strange, too, in its dimness. At such times not alone the church, but the altar itself, was commonly a blaze of light, its every candle lit, its every lamp flaming at its highest. So was it not now, but rather as if Monseigneur served the awful office of the Tenebræ. From the middle of the groined roof,

there hung indeed one feeble spark, another glimmered through crimson glass before the high altar, and at either end of the holy table there winked and guttered a solitary candle. These four lights there were, these and no more, and through the darkness they revealed the white Madonna, throned above the altar, looking glimmering down, and scarcely visible, as if that which is highest in human love had but small part in that strange union.

But strangest of all in those who through the shadows played their parts, themselves no more than shadows. So dim and uncertain were they—priest, bridegroom, bride, and witnesses—that it seemed as if the dead forerunners of my Lord Bishop, whose generations slept beneath the heavy flags of the nave, had for one brief hour returned to their ancient ministry. Save for the one monotonous, low murmuring voice the silence was that of the grave, nor was there life or motion except when the priest moved here or there in the exercise of his office, or as the two masked figures before the altar obeyed his whispered orders. At last even the priest fell silent, kneeling in his place with bowed head; and all movement stayed. The ceremony was ended. In the sight of God and the church Denise de Lhoeac was Denise La Clazonnè.

She it was who broke the hush. Rising to her feet, she crossed the open space to the altar-rails, and paused on the uppermost of the three steps leading down to the body of the church, her pale dress

showing like a faint grey blur against the black hollow of the nave.

"I have kept my word, Monseigneur," said she, turning towards the two still kneeling figures as she spoke. "Kept it, Lhoeac fashion, because I pledged it, rashly as it now seems to me in my cooler blood, and because the strait you set me in was too hard for me."

De Lhoeac and the newly-made bridegroom had risen while she spoke, and now the former answered her from where he stood, his back to the dim Madonna and his hand still leaning on the holy table.

"Is the truth less the truth because your blood is cold? Is that which you have done——"

But she raised a hand and waved him into silence.

"Was it the truth? Hot blood proves it no more than cold blood gives it the lie. Was it the truth? That is the question that was too hard for me to answer. If yes, who was I to fight against God, and what am I or what my life that I should refuse it? But if no—if no—oh! even then I had pledged my word, and—and—the strait was too hard for me. There was none to guide me. There are times when the mother of God is far off, and the mother of life would have been so near."

"But"—and Monseigneur's voice took on a sterner ring; the scene was not to his liking and must be stopped, the more so that in his wise knowledge of human nature he had not told La Clazonnè all the

truth—"am I not your spiritual father and your near kinsman? Oh! daughter, daughter, these doubts shame both yourself and me."

"God forgive me if they are wrong, and you if they are right," said she, and her voice was well-nigh as stern as his own; "but that I doubt is true, and for the very reason that doubt should be impossible. Within these last hours Robert Patcham has told me that which it had been better he had told me earlier, or not at all; since next to death a broken faith is the worst sorrow of life."

"Roger Patcham!" Truly Monseigneur was an artist. From sorrow he had turned to righteous anger and rebuke, now these were buried beneath contempt and a cold scorn; nor in any shift of mood or temper was the light needful. Even through the heavy gloom his voice told all. "Roger Patcham! And would you set such a one as Roger Patcham up as witness against such a one as I! A hireling bully; a roystering, swearing, pinch-pursed braggart; a needy, hungry adventurer whose enmity I earned a dozen years past by warning him that he who robbed Lhoeac would have more than a weak girl to deal with. Roger Patcham! a churl, a stranger, and an alien! Shame, Denise! shame! I say again."

But neither rebuke nor contempt could cow the girl or turn her from her purpose.

"Roger Patcham was but the mouthpiece of the dead," she answered without a break in her level

tones, though those who watched her saw her hands meet in a hard grip across her breast. "The message was the message of my grandsire. Nay, it seemed—but in this Captain Patcham was not clear—as if some power higher and beyond this world had spoken."

"Aye, aye ; and what was this message ?"

"The sum of it was this—

When priest or kin hath aught to win,
Then trust thou least both kin and priest ;

and that——"

"And for that jingle," broke in my Lord Bishop harshly, squaring his still broad shoulders and striding a pace or two forward as he spoke ; "a jingle told you by such a man as this Patcham, you would discredit Henri de Lhoeac, you would brand him as liar, cheat, cozener, false servant of the altar by which he stands, and for his own ends deceiver of God and man alike ! By the Mass ! the old enmity of my brother Guy was but hidden skin-deep, and a pin-prick brings it to the surface. He ever hated me, did Guy, and swore that even from the grave he would strike me. But this is that wastrel Patcham's doing, not yours, and so I pardon you."

"Stranger and alien he is, though no churl," answered Denise, taking a step forward in her turn. "If every Frenchman were as true a man as Roger Patcham, then might France in her self-reliance face Spain, England, and the Emperor with a quiet heart.

More than that: this hireling bully and needy adventurer, this roystering pinch-pursed braggart, is so nice a gentleman that even in his hate, if hate there is, he has never slandered his enemy. Not even to-night did he do more than bid me think twice before I stretched my hand out further than I could draw it back; and when I asked him why, he stammered, gnawed his lip, and at the last quoted the rhyme I tell you. But not from himself. 'Twas one,' he said, 'wrote it for the old Seigneur on a tag of parchment twenty years ago and before even I knew Lhoeac! A bully? A wastrel? May God in His grace ever send for the safe keeping of Lhoeac such a hireling rogue as Roger Patcham.'

Do what she would, and it was clear she set a curb upon herself, the level voice was vibrating with passion before she ended. Her own fears and doubts she could hold in check, but to hear the man belittled who had nourished both her and Lhoeac was more than she could abide in patience. For all his knowledge of men and women Monseigneur had not calculated well when he derided Roger Patcham to Denise de Lhoeac.

"All this," she went on, with a gesture towards that other and hitherto silent shadow who made the third upon the raised level of the altar steps, "has a meaning for you, Monsieur La Clazonnè as it has for my Lord Bishop. If I have been cajoled—oh, your pardon, Monseigneur, your pardon, I say no more than *if*, and by Saint Agnes of Lhoeac, the

power of that *if* grows with the moments whether I will or no—if I have been cajoled, let no man try a second lure, or seek to break by a hairs-breadth the conditions I have made. If I have kept my word—and have I not kept it?—you Monsieur, must keep yours. Never, come what may, can you expect more than I have vowed. Nay, my very vow comes between.”

“Madame,” and even with all her preoccupation Denise could not but note that Giles La Clazonnè had a pleasant voice, “in these few minutes I have learned more than I was meant to learn, and it is borne in upon me that in this thing there has been more than one cat’s paw. My Lord Bishop is a bold player. It is a month since Monsieur de Saint-Seurin broached this alliance, and half that time since he bade me come to Bordeaux for its further consideration and final adjustment. Once here——”

“Chut, chut!” broke in Monseigneur impatiently; “the thing is done, and all this talk is so much wind, for is there one of us all would wish it undone?”

“A month since?” answered Denise, not heeding the interruption, but speaking rather as if she and Giles La Clazonnè were alone in the dim church. “I see, I see: that was when I consented to join him here. Yes, Monsieur?”

“Once here, Madame, and we had met,” and through the gloom she could see La Clazonnè bow;

"the importunity was on my side, and not on his."

"Ah ? so we have met, Monsieur ?"

"Five times, Madame, and each time you did me the honour to be well enough content."

"I, Monsieur ? I ? By Our Lady above us there, it is simple truth that I never so much as saw you. Though by that I mean you no discourtesy."

"That was my folly, Madame, and finely it has been punished. I should have known I was no match for such as you. But what would you have ? Youth is vain and foolish ; besides, he was your uncle and God's priest. Besides again, it is easy to believe that which we desire to believe."

"Yes, Monsieur." Her voice was softer now, softer than it had been since she had halted at the altar-stairs and turned upon them both. "What next ?"

"You had your whim, Madame, but no more than was your right as the most beautiful woman in all Bordeaux, and the sweetest. The foolishness was mine not to recognise they were a travesty and a lie. 'She is country-bred and shy,' said Monseigneur. 'She likes you well enough, better than you suppose, but will have no closer acquaintance lest gossips talk. They are unaccustomed to lovers on the slopes of Lhoeac. Wait, better things will come presently.' And I waited, Madame : I would have waited seven years. This came this afternoon. 'Who would have thought the wench was so

romantic?' said Monseigneur. 'It must be the Italian blood in her; we Lhoeacs are more prosaic. She wants this, she wants that, she wants the other, but she will marry you all the same!' and I—oh, Madame, I dared to hope that these were no more than girlish trials of my love—whims born of some romance of ancient chivalry; and that, having proved me knightly——"

"I will tell you God's truth. I never so much as heard your name until to-day, Monsieur la Clazonnè, except as a neighbour of Lhoeac, and then only as one might talk of a cattle-herder or a burner of charcoal; therefore spare me your protestations. My conditions stand."

"Have I sought to shift them, Madame? Have I by a hairs-breadth crossed the lines that you yourself laid down? Let your conditions stand. I am content to wait. At least you cannot take hope from me."

"No, Monsieur, nor give you hope. Hope?" she went on bitterly; "Monsieur de Lhoeac has murdered hope, and it is God's mercy if faith has not gone shipwreck too. Oh! you men—you ruthless, callous, calculating men, who care not what you trample under foot if but your goals are reached—have you no fear of God?"

"Madame, believe me——"

"Monsieur, have done with Madames; they are an offence to me—they suggest a claim which I refuse to honour, and will refuse. Save for the

ring that plighted troth—the ring that went from Lhoeac in disaster and came back by chance, and has now gone to you in what I pray God is not worse disaster—I am Mademoiselle de Lhoeac, and never can or will be more. My conditions stand.”

But not knowing her man, and full only of her own resentment, she had pricked La Clazonnè in temper and pride alike.

“What?” cried he, striding forward and facing her with his hands upon his hips, a broad pillar of blackness in the flickering candle-light; “is all the wrong one way? Fair and sweet you are, God knows. God knows, too, that I loved you for your gracious womanliness without so much as speech passing between us, which perhaps argues me something of the fool but nothing of the villain; but that Giles la Clazonnè should give Mademoiselle de Lhoeac the right to be called Madame is not a thing for scorn or contempt even though his love came unwished for. That you hold Lhoeac sacred is well, but have I no pride in Clazonnè? For more generations than I have fingers we have dwelt there, and I am the last of my race. Is it no grief to see the old line end in me, and all for a priest’s lies? Let your conditions stand. Who sought to break them? Not I, Madame; not I. Is it your folly to think that a man, because he is a man, can respect neither himself nor his word? Oh, we are not all Henri de Lhoeacs nor brute beasts! See,” and he turned towards the altar. “There, through the gloom,

the calm, pitying Christ looks down upon this troubled world. Darkness is about Him, and faith alone it is that clearly knows Him there. Madame, by that sorrowful Christ I swear that my will and oath are as strong and pure as yours. Until the day breaks for us—as break it shall—and dimness and distrust are done with, I hold to your conditions. God send the day! even as He sends the dawn to show the pity, love, and blessing of that face full in the smile of the world.”

That ended it. Round swept Denise, awestruck in spite of herself and not a little shamed, and through the darkness they could hear the click of her heels and the swish of her trailing draperies upon the flagging. Then came the soft clap of a padded door shutting to its spring at the further end of the church. By the same road, when an interval had elapsed, went La Clazonnè. As for Monseigneur, he passed behind the altar, through the choir, and out into his sanctity's disrobing-room. Thence there was a private passage to his own apartments, and there he sat for a full hour staring, chin on breast, into the warm ashes of the dead fire. At last he rose, and the sum of his thoughts was this: there was never a bird yet but had to chip its shell before it could sing. For his own sake and the glory of the kinship old La Clazonnè will keep to his pact. The rest is my affair: Lhoeac is lost, but its losing makes me Cardinal.

The day that followed saw Roger Patcham's puzzle-

ment as to women's ways grow deeper than ever. For no reason, hinted, spoken, or shadowed, and with not so much as four-and-twenty hours' delay, Denise would have it that she must return to Lhocac; but it was at least comforting that eight thousand crowns contented Monseigneur. After all, though it was not every one who found it out, my Lord Bishop had something of a conscience.

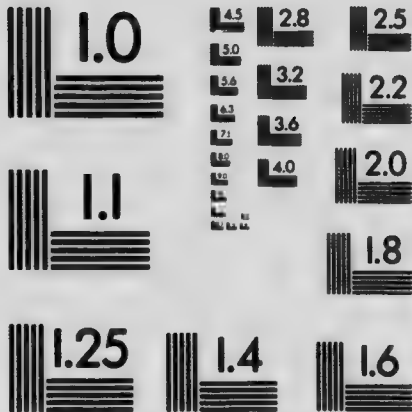
II

Neither then nor after could Roger Patcham fathom how two weeks had worked such a change in Denise. The day she first rode under the broad gateway of the Salinières she was no more than a child for all her grown womanhood and twenty years of life—a child in her frank irresponsibility, her ready, careless sunshine, her unwearied and cheery optimism. For, surely, the stamp of a child, let its age be what it may, is that it lives in and for the day, sucking its blessing as a bee does honey, and leaves the morrow to take care of the things of itself. No more than fourteen days passed before she again rode through the time-worn arch, and yet the child had become a grave and sweet-faced woman, deep-eyed, serious, and with laughter rarely on her lips; silent, too, beyond common; and in the trouble of his heart Roger marvelled at the change, nor could the memory



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of the eight thousand crowns saved to Lhoeac wholly comfort him.

For the most part it was a dull ride south. The quips and jests, the light talk of a strange, new world that danced the long day through, and half the night, on tip-toe ; of lovers to be schooled and scorned ; of worldly wit and saintly wisdom ; talk part earnest and part pure gaiety of youth ; and which had been the girl's chatter as she rode north, was at an end. All that was done with—quips, jests, and talk were as dead as the last year's small ale. Twice honest Roger trailed a hook, but no fish bit, nor even rippled the surface with a passing snap at the bait.

"That second gathering at my Lord Bishop's," said he, with a shake of the head and watching her out of the tail of his eyes. "Its music, satins, silks, its wondrous play of colour, the babble and the laughter, the warm air blown with perfume and alive with wit—truly, Mademoiselle, that was a sight and a hearing to stick in a man's memory."

"Aye," answered she, "a pretty sight enough. We dine at Bazas, do we not ?"

Nor did his second cast of the line fare better.

"Some men love Paris," said he, speaking abruptly out of an awkward, long-drawn silence, as shy men will, and not always please either themselves or their hearers ; "but give me Bordeaux. The long, grey walls, the busy quays, and that broad stretch of shining river make a bonny picture,"

"Bordeaux!" and her mouth hardened. "Lhoeac is worth ten Bordeauxs. See, they have halted there behind us. I think, Father Roger, that Madame Catherine is in trouble with her stirrup-shoe."

Once she reached Lhoeac, it was soon clear to more than Captain Roger that a new order of things had begun. Not again would it be in the power of Monsieur de Saint-Seurin to throw in his face the sarcasm that he had played the Seigneur nobly! Thenceforward Denise de Lhoeac was Suzeraine and she alone. Not that she meddled with the guards, or the keeping of the peace within her borders—that was man's work; and in her twenty years of child's life her ears and eyes had been open for all her careless ways, and she had sucked in the wisdom of leaving every tool to do its fitting labour. But little by little the reins of control were gathered into her fingers, and inside of six months there was not throughout the Seigneurie a barn burnt, a thief hung, a beggar set in the stocks but Denise de Lhoeac knew the reason why; little by little, firmly and yet by such gentle, slow degrees, that neither Roger Patcham, Madame Catherine, nor any one in authority was grudgingly conscious of the loss of power.

For Roger Patcham, and in all things that touched the vassals of Lhoeac—their needs, their troubles, their shiftless, turbulent ways—she was the master, ignorant, but shrewd and grave-minded, reckoning the spirit of an act to be more than the act itself,

and mending her ignorance fast. With Madame Catherine and her maids within doors she was the gentle, tolerant, even-handed mistress : wisely blind at times, but not over-blind ; and within and without there were few but in the end—and an end not far to reach—came to love and trust Mamzelle Denise. Thus it was that in three years she grew into the life of Lhoeac—grew into it so that she was the life of Lhoeac, and so could the better cope with the sore trouble that presently fell upon the Seigneurie.

But, woman-like, and being wrapped as she was in all that lay nearest to her, the events of the wider world touched her not at all, or at best but little. When news came with a bustle, as it did in the early summer of the next year, that Monseigneur was now red-hatted and "His Eminence," she merely set down her work in her lap and looked Patcham thoughtfully in the face.

"So he has won the next trick in the game, as he said he would ! but even though he clears the board, can a thistle bear figs or a thorn grapes ?"

Which was as so much monkish Latin to Father Roger.

Even the stir and ferment caused by the King's disastrous second Italian war in no way moved her, but when the rumour that Alexander Borgia had drunk the bitter drink of her own brewing and so fallen into the trap he had set for others grew to truth, she again puzzled Captain Patcham.

"Then the sword has fallen ? Truly my uncle is

a wise man ! If he were but as honest as he is clear-sighted, he would go far. Now we shall see if God has indeed pardoned the church, or if for its sins He will give it over afresh to the spoiler. If He does, then truly the latter end will be worse than the first."

But Julian della Rovere ascended the throne of Saint Peter, and in spite of all his intrigues Henri de Lhoec remained at Bordeaux. This time there was no Philip the Fair to play Pope-maker.

Isolated, therefore, and world-forgetting as Lhoec was, the near trivial raised a louder buzz of gossip, and stirred its interest deeper, than any remote catastrophe ; and the return of Jean Tron to Saint Agnes was a greater event to the Seigneurie than the defeat of La Tremoille at the Garigliano. Why not ? A few hundred Frenchmen more or less mattered nothing to Lhoec, but every soul within its four corners felt a reflected importance because of Jean Tron's six months' pirating along the Portuguese coast ; they were not wont to go far afield, these good folks of Lhoec, and to them the sea was a fearsome thing !

Saint Agnes, therefore, in its pride and fulness of heart, welcomed its returned hero with such an overflowing and liquid hospitality as stretched three-fourths of its men groaning on their straw for the entire of the next day. Amongst these, as was natural, was Jean Tron. Had he not to tell his tale a score of times, adding a larger, richer, and more

gaudy amplitude with each telling, and was not talking drouthy work? Was he not, too, but three days from a service where none dared get honestly drunk because of the unreasoning temper of the patron? But whereas the rest of Saint Agnes came, in the accustomed course and according to common and established rule, slowly back to life and temporary repentance, Jean Tron woke to a fever that set his tongue clacking sea-tales, the lurid particularity and naked frankness of which drove even the stolid women of the village from his room, white-faced and trembling, though the Guiennese of that generation were not a squeamish race.

For three days he lay mumbling and tossing, groaning piteously at times, now for his soul's health, now for his body, and both body and soul grievously sick: his lolling tongue brown and dry, his face white and red by turns, while upon lips and gums, and even teeth, there came a strange growth, in appearance like a dark fur, a growth such as not even the wisest witch-wench in all the village had ever set eyes on. More than ever, and none the less because of the broken tales that set men nudging, Jean Tron was a marvel, and in these three days there was not so much as a babe in all Saint Agnes that had not stared its fill at him. Then the marvel failed, though the staring went on as hard as ever, for on the third day from his feasting Jean Tron died.

That the traveller's return, and the story of his reception with its revelry of swinish drunkenness,

should be reported to Roger Patcham was a thing of course. Of the former he took note, intending presently to send for the man and question him, since of tales of adventure Roger Patcham was still as greedy as a boy, but the latter he heeded not at all. A merry heart pays its dues without grumbling; why should Saint Agnes not make a beast of itself its own way if it chose? Its carousings were no affair of his. But when on the third day Jean Tron died without coming again to sober speech it was another matter. Strong drink might give a man an aching head and a troubled conscience, though more of one than the other, but never yet within the memory of tradition had it killed a peasant of Saint Agnes, least of all could it kill such a hard-bitten fellow as this Jean Tron. Doubtless the rogue's pockets were not empty, and the thing must be looked to, lest there had been foul play.

Down the slope from the Château rode Captain Roger with three of Lhoeac's men behind him, down the slope, under the edge of the wood, round by the Rocks of the Bears, across the river, and in between the straggling rows of huddled houses. It was early June; the three days' wonder was dead, and work was plenty in the fields. The village, therefore, was empty except for its stray dogs and litter of brawling children. Death was no such strange thing in Saint Agnes that any should go softly, or abate a jot of the joys of life because of it.

At the widow Tron's door Patcham dismounted,

and bidding one of his men follow him, he left their horses in the care of the other two. Here, again, there was no need for ceremony. Death was so frank a visitor that punctilio was uncalled for, and besides, it would have been a strange thing had there been a house in all Lhoeac that, by day or by night, would have kept its latch clicked against Captain Roger. Pushing open the door, the two entered the cottage, a typical narrow-windowed, dingy, two-roomed hovel, reeking full with a dozen evil-smelling abominations, and, guided by a murmur of voices, turned to the left through a break in the wall : inner door or dividing curtain there was none.

On the straw in the corner, a coverlid of sacking tucked to his chin and his living clothes propping his head, lay Jean Tron staring blindly at the ribbon of sky showing through the narrow slit of window fronting him. It was as if in quitting the world he looked to the last at the sunshine he had loved so well, and no one had had the heart to set the ferryman's fee upon his lids to shut out the sight. Bending over him, chattering and full of the importance of their dreary business, were three crones, the village dressers of the dead.

At Roger Patcham's entrance their gossip ceased, and of their presence he made short work. The gropings of justice were not for the common gaze, and his line of questioning would depend on what he found.

"Let the man bide as he is, and get you gone for

to-day," he said roughly, checking one of them as she stooped to draw aside the covering. "Has monk or leech seen to him?"

"Small use for a leech, Messire," answered one. "Trust my word for that. Eight-and-sixty have I put through my hands, old and young, and the signs are clear. D'ye see the blue at the root of the——"

"I have eyes, woman, I have eyes; quit chatter. The question is not if the man is dead—a three-year child could see that—but how he died. What of a friar as night-watcher?"

"The man's mother, Marie Tron, has gone to Saint Joseph's, Messire, and heart-broken she is. Beyond a crown he had in his pocket there is nought to show for his six months' voyaging. What comes by rapine goes by ruin's a true proverb. A corpse in a house is dear bought at a crown with the church to pay."

"? No more than that?" cried Roger, all his suspicions roused afresh.

"Not a denier more, Messire."

"Well, begone. Now Martin," he went on as the women shuffled out, grumbling amongst themselves. "Fling the sacking off him and have him nearer to the light, that we may see what manner of tale his body hath to tell. So; sideways a little: now lift his left arm lest there was a—— Saints in heaven! Drop him, man! drop him and stand back! Back I say, back, further, further! Lord God! what evil

has Lhoeac done that this should come upon us."

For all the crone's handling of eight-and-sixty poor shells of outworn humanity, Roger Patcham's experience was as wide as hers. Death by adventure and misadventure—disease, accident, and the long course of nature, by flood, by field, and by fireside—was familiar to him. He had, therefore, lounged against the wall with his hands lapped carelessly behind his back while the man-at-arms went about his gruesome work, following his instructions methodically and without a qualm. But as the daylight struck into the armpit Patcham started and bent forward, his easy-going, half-negligent watchfulness banished on the instant, and with it the healthy freshness from his face. Then, as the other, startled and confused by the sudden outburst and sharp insistence, drew back, dropping the arm with a thud upon the floor, the Englishman clapped his hand over mouth and nostrils and bent lower, warily inching forward a foot or two. What he saw was enough, and past argument. The plague was in Lhoeac, and all Saint Agnes had as good as taken it to its arms.

Drawing back to the wall again, he stood staring at Jean Tron, silent and puzzled. To do him justice, after the first involuntary repulsion, he gave but little thought to his own risks, but how to act for the good of Lhoeac and the protection of Mamzelle Denise troubled him sorely. There seemed but two

courses possible, and scant time to choose between them. Any fool could cry, "Plague, plague!" and so drive other fools to their death in hot haste, since blind terror is the plague's surest seed-bed. But, on the other hand, let him hold his peace and leave that ghastly thing staring at him from the floor to all the frank and callous horrors of a peasant lying in state, that one period of a man's supreme importance, for then, and then only in all his toilsome years, is he the one centre of interest, and the contagion would spread like a May mildew among vines. In the end he did what half the world does in a crisis—he compromised.

Turning abruptly, he motioned to the man-at-arms to precede him from the house. Once out in the sunshine, he drew the door after him, closing it with a crash that in its brutal carelessness was just a thought over-acted, and walked leisurely down the short distance separating the cottage from the roadway, and climbed up into his saddle with what he was conscious was ostentatious deliberation.

"Do you," said he to the other two who had waited without, "keep watch here and see that no one enters. When the widow Tron returns bid her lock the door and give you the key. She must sleep elsewhere to-night. The monk can asperge the corpse and say his prayers to-morrow. The key you will bring to the Chateau. And, mark this, when I say no one, I mean no one. Is that clear? The main point is that Jean Tron bides alone until to-morrow."

"Then perhaps it were better that we kept watch, one here and one behind?"

"And spoil all by having fifty fools agape? No, do as you are bid, neither more nor less, and remember that a silent tongue breaks no teeth. Martin, do you ride with me."

Very slowly they jogged homewards through the afternoon heat, and presently—though Roger Patcham was a very burr at times for roughness—Martin's itch of curiosity grew intolerable.

"D'ye think," said he, ranging up alongside his captain, "that the poor wretch had foul play?"

"That," answered Roger, with a sober shake of his head, "we shall see for ourselves to-morrow. Till then there is good reason to walk softly and say little."

But on the morrow Jean Tron told no tales, neither of plague nor of foul play, nor were ever orisons said by his bier. In the small hours of the morning—how, none knew, unless it were the devil had come for his own—the hovel, a crazy thing of tinder-dry thatch and rotten wood, went up in fire; and though Roger Patcham was on the scene before even Saint Agnes was well awake, there was not so much as the great pole saved from the ruin.

III

But to go back a few hours. Captain Patcham did not dismount at the great door as was his wont,

but rode round to a small postern that admitted directly to the stabling. There he threw Martin the reins, and, bidding him spread no rumours lest they should prove a lie, betook himself secretly to his own quarters, where by change of clothing and such like precautions he got rid of contagion as best he could. Martin and his fellows might take their chance—he had Mamzelle Denise to see to, and could afford no risks.

To his mind her course was plain. She must quit Lhoeac, and at once. Now was the time to claim from Madame Carlo Perego some return for having so frankly helped her to a husband, and that Caterina would give Denise an asylum for as long as she chose to seek it he made no doubt. That Denise must be told the why and wherefore of the sudden shift was a thing of course; she was no longer a puppet to dance to another's finger-strings without a reason. So, having lured her away from where she sat a housewife amongst her maids, he told her shortly all that it behoved her to know of the tale of Jean Tron.

That her face paled as she listened was no shame to her. The scar left on France by the plague-spot, when as many as forty thousand died in Paris alone, was no more than healed; and as the tale went on her breath came in deep chest-draughts, and Roger could see her hands clench till the nails must have almost bitten through the skin of the palms.

"And so," he ended, "the seed is sown, and God alone knows what the harvest shall be. That Saint Agnes is ripe for the reaping is past crying over, and is true of all Guienne, or of all France for the matter of that; but if every house is like Marie Tron's, the pest will run through the poor souls like rot through sheep. There is no time to be lost, Mademoiselle; by this hour to-morrow you must be ten leagues away, nor need you think to see Lhoeac again until after the frosts."

"But," and after the first sound she had to stop speech to control the quivering of her lips before she could complete her words, "is the thing certain? Think, Roger, think; is there no hope? May it not be a—a—mistake?"

"Neither mistake nor hope," he answered bluntly and with emphasis, since the truth was not alone kindest, but safest. "Put all thought of both from you. God forbid that I should tell you all I saw and the rotting horror of it. The plague's in Lhoeac as sure as Jean Tron's dead."

"My people, Roger, my people. Oh God! have mercy on my people!"

"Your people must fend for themselves, Mademoiselle, and I think that when once the terror grips them the end won't be long, and grip them it will. That is the curse of your peasant; he has no more spirit than a sick cat. Perhaps it is better so; it will be the sooner over, but while it lasts Lhoeac will be a—but that's not the point. The point is

that you and Madame Catherine must make haste and begone."

"Yes," said she, with her eyes on his face, and speaking slowly as one whose thought was busy, "yes, *ma mie Maman* must go. And you, Father Roger?"

"Oh, I? Michel Roux can be trusted to see you safe. There are men enough for a guard. My work lies here."

"And tell me this, Father Roger," said she softly, "where does my work lie?"

Roger Patcham drew himself up with a start. That there could be two sides to his proposition had never struck him, and for the moment his jaw fell.

"Not here, Mademoiselle; in God's name, not here!"

"In His name, where, if not with my people? Speak truth, old friend."

"There are peasants to spare, but only one Denise de Lhoeac."

"And being Denise de Lhoeac shall I turn coward, the one coward of us all?"

"Mademoiselle, Mademoiselle," and in his agitation Roger Patcham seized Denise by the hands, and holding her at arms-length gripped her harder than he knew. "This is no question of courage. Go, for Lhoeac's sake. This thing will pass, and if in passing it leaves Lhoeac bereft, what will become of those who remain?"

"The thing is right, Father Roger; and, being

right, let God take care of the if's. To Him I trust them."

"But what gain is there that you should keep yourself pent up? Nay, there is rather loss. How can we come and go, since we risk you at every coming?"

"Who said pent up?"

"What!" cried Roger Patcham, staring in blank horror, "you would never go to Saint Agnes with this let loose? That is no dainty woman's business."

"Leave the dainty aside. Sick folk make woman's work, and what another woman can do I can do. We are all one at bottom when the need comes, whether wench of the hut or dame of the castle."

"But the sights, the sights; the sickening, filthy horror of it all!"

"Aye, I know, I know," and for the first time her voice broke, since the nature that can face danger may yet shrink from dirt; "hearten me, Father Roger, lest the spirit and the flesh fall out and I be lost between them."

"And will nothing move you?"

"Dear friend, be honest with me. In my place wouldst thou be moved?"

"Then God bless and keep you; there is hope for Saint Agnes yet. Oh! these swine, these swine, I would to the Lord——"

But Denise put her hand upon his mouth.

"Let the poor souls be," she said; "and you know this well enough, Father Roger, that for all your

rough ways and hard speech you would take your life loose in your hand for these very same swine, nor count it any great thing to do."

Which, being a truth there was no gainsaying, ended the argument. As for Madame Catherine, she was of a different clay, and so went sick with terror, and yet clung to Denise as if life had lain that way and not death; so that when Roger Patcham took to reckoning up afresh the incomprehensibilities of women he had to add this marvel, as old as the world and as enduring—neither fear nor death can turn back love.

For three days there was no strange stir in the village. The mystery and amazement of Jean Tron's death and funeral pyre had worn off, and Saint Agnes was as Saint Agnes had ever been—dull, sleepy, and with no interest beyond the cloddish gossip of its one wine-shop. Then, almost in the one hour, to five out of its eighty hovels there came the notoriety of sudden sickness, and as the news drifted up to Lhoeac, Denise felt that grip seize upon her heart which was not to slacken for many sorrowful weeks. The first seeds of Jean Tron's sowing had sprouted, but they were to the full brairding what the herald droppings of a storm are to the vicious lash of the final cloud-burst. The five grew to ten, the ten to twenty, then at a leap the twenty were a hundred; death's hand went busily here and there, and with his fingers fumbling at its throat, Saint Agnes went fair mad.

But before that came to pass Denise had taken action. In warfare there are two methods of fighting an entrenched enemy, assault and siege, and of these she chose the second. To pity Saint Agnes was good, and the poor souls had fair need for all that pity could give them, but her care, thought, and vigilance were for Lhoeac at large, and for all her pity she had no right to sacrifice the whole to the part. Therefore round Saint Agnes she threw a cordon of Lhoeac's men, changing them once in three days, and through which no man might pass out, let his plea be never so plausible, his tale never so piteous, his terror never so great, nor in without her permission.

"Let the monks come," said she when Roger posed her with the difficulty, half because she was mistress, and half in annoyed vexation at her self-will; "but once here let them bide here. A friar's frock can carry contagion as well as a peasant's rags, and he who does God's work must wait the issue, even to death itself, and never look back."

Then, leaving Madame Catherine—a limp figure of tearful protestations—to play mistress at the Château, she rode down to Saint Agnes, and, with Roger Patcham as captain of her troop, camped in the pasture a short furlong back from the village.

That had been on the day when the ten became twenty and death's fingers nipped for the second time, and it may be that the sight of the circle of armed men holding them pent, and their Suzeraine

within the circle, helped to drive Saint Agnes mad. For the first time they were shaken out of their stolid acceptance of the existent as the inevitable, and the very presence of their mistress was enough to flutter them abroad like pigeons from a raided cote. The aged, the sick, the dying, the dead, were alike forgotten, and in its terror Saint Agnes made a burst for it knew not and cared not where, if it were but anywhere out of Saint Agnes. But the cordon drew in. In every direction the straggling flight was turned back, and that night was to Denise de Lhoëac the most terrible of her life.

Terror broke through the formal crust of reverence and awe that shut the peasant from his lord; the thin veneer of the church's overlaying was torn aside, the unquestioning obedience born of many generations' service was flung to the winds, and under the spur of abject dread of it knew not what the sleeping devil in Saint Agnes awoke. Fire, sword, and spoliation they could endure: were not these and the death that hung upon their skirts, sooner or later the almost inevitable lot of the peasant, the accustomed pricks against which none kicked; but this creeping horror that killed them stealthily in corners and with so gross a loathsomeness, they would not tamely suffer. A motley, ill-favoured crowd it was that clamoured round the tent before which stood Denise de Lhoëac—women with wailing, staring children hugged in their arms or clinging to their draggled skirts, men bearing

their poor wealth of household goods upon their shoulders, and careless who they flung aside in the brutality of the despair that possessed them; the aged and infirm hobbling on sticks or crutches, their very frailty forgotten in the frantic rush thrusting its way to the front; all weeping, railing, cursing, threatening, as the mood moved them, and only held impotent to murder by the girdle of Lhoeac's men drawn betwixt them and the object of their wrath. The very sick had crawled from their straw, and in the forefront of the circle added their execrations to the tumult, and there, as they cursed, the scourge found them, for two staggered, swayed upon their knees, and died; and round about them, and over them, the clamour drew in, unheeding.

Thrice Denise sought to speak, and thrice the seething crowd roared her down, pelting her with threats and vile epithets till, though she still faced it, her lips went as white as her face. For the most part the outcry came from the men, the aged, and the sick; and Roger Patcharn noticed with a kind of wonder that the stronger or the weaker the life the greater the clamour. The women, except for a few gross termagants, were silent or only wept softly.

"Let them be," he said to Denise under his breath as her hand went down after her third failure. "They will tire presently, and if I know aught of the plague you will be well avenged on

the dogs for this night's outburst. Let their rage calm and then your turn will come."

"Avenged?" answered she, with a sob in her throat. "God knows they might have me in pieces this very hour if it would but save them."

"You, you?" he cried, stamping his foot as he looked round the tenfold circle of passionate faces lit for all their hot anger into a cold ghastliness by the full of the moon; "before a hair of your head fell I would see not alone Saint Agnes, but every coward and brute beast in Lhoeac laid in the ashes with Jean Tron; and yet from my heart I cannot but say you are right to be here, for all their cursing. Poor souls!" he went on, with contemptuous toleration, but still watching them narrowly, "how can they understand? and being ignorant, why should they not curse? It were beyond nature that they should not."

In both his prophecies Roger Patcham was right. The anger that is born of terror soon tires lacking fresh fuel. Little by little the storm subsided. Its very passion tore its persistence to tatters, and it was still three hours before dawn when Denise went in peace to seek such rest as was possible. Not to sleep—overstrained nature forbade sleep—but at least to tranquillity and the grateful calm coolness of the night, to prayer, to pity, and to planning. Saint Agnes must not be let suffer for the senseless folly of Saint Agnes! Then, when the day had dawned broadly, the second forecast came true.

THE SEVEN HOUSES

Through the low hours of the early morning the plague fearfully avenged the overnight madness, for the folk went down like murrained sheep.

Then it was that the twenty leaped to a hundred, and then it was, too, that the terrifying impish tricks of the pest showed themselves. A veritable monarch amongst scourges is the plague, choosing whosoever he will with a royal prerogative that disdains reasons. *Le roy le veult*, that is enough. In this house three lay groaning, in that four; then with the regal caprice of King Death he leaped four hovels even filthier than the rest and in the next drew two into his arms. From thence he skipped the street at a bound, and like a runner upon stepping-stones left the impress of his foot upon a long line without a pause or break. Impartial as God's justice, he showed no natural selection. The gaffer crawling on two sticks, the babe at the mother's breast, the girl fresh from her first communion, the burly, weather-tanned bread-winner as hard-bitten and firm of muscle as one of his own oxen, all were gathered alike to his Catholic bosom; and neither age, youth, nor strength could say him nay, nor cry, "I am exempt!" Only, to some the end came swiftly, while with others he played and toyed, till between hope and fear they knew not whether to praise God or curse their torment.

That day Denise won her victory. With the poor souls of Saint Agnes reaction had set in. The fierce denunciations of the night were replaced by sullen

indifference, and in the room of wild rage was a callous and deadly fatalism. They were to die, then let them die. Left to themselves, their logic would have gone a step further ; they were to die, then let them die at once, and in their despairing dash for the outer world the ring of guards would have cut them down and so made an end. All that Denise stopped.

Dressed in pure white, and as sad-faced as the Madonna from their own church, a true mother of many sorrows not of her own making, she went from stricken house to stricken house, Roger Patcham and two grave-eyed brothers of Saint Joseph following after her ; and if these last trembled, they trembled behind the set masks of their solemn faces and gave no sign. The sick she cheered, the despairing she roused, the dead she mourned, the living she comforted ; and as wives, mothers, husbands, children, saw the sweet and gentle woman, who was to their awed reverence as far removed from them as the King himself, share their dangers, bearing with them the burden of their grief and loss, they took to themselves both shame and courage. The sullen waters were broken up, life took fresh strength unto itself, and the newly-stirred dignity of duty overcame despair.

Not all at once, for if the night had been terrible what was the day ! The plague apart, Saint Agnes in its frank nakedness was a revelation to its

mistress. In spite of the narrow windows the pitiless June sun searched out the hideous misery of the hovels, laying bare the unimagined wretchedness which lurked behind the sometimes bright exteriors. The filth, the noisomeness, the teeming life packed in the cramped restrictions of the space, the generations of broken age and budding youth herded together within the narrow compass of a single room, the outrage of all modesty, where parents, children, grandsire burrowed in the same scanty litter of tossed straw, appalled her. The beasts of Lhoeac were the chosen of the earth compared with the Christians of Saint Agnes, and a sense of her own guilt smote her with sudden sharpness. To leave an evil uncured was to be partaker in the evil, and before God such ignorance as she could plead was no palliation of guilt. It was her business to know her duty of life, and she had not known : therefore she was guilty.

But add the plague to all this : the living and the dead huddled in the one heap ; the groans, the prayers, the curses of the untended sick, some already parched with the death-thirst and left untended to go their own solitary way to the dark valley. If the unstricken had ceased to care even for their own lives, what thought would they give to those already in handgrips with the destroyer ? None ; and so Saint Agnes gave them no thought. That was the work and victory of Denise de Lhoeac. Through these despairing houses, of death she

moved like an angel of life and mercy, fearless, tranquil, pitying, authoritative, and none but herself knowing how she sickened, staggering in spirit under the burden she bore for others. But as she passed eyes brightened, crushed souls rose to fresh vigour, and a growing wholesomeness of mind supplanted the callous and inert fatalism. Weary alike in body and mind, when the night fell she could take to her comfort that Roger Patcham was right when he said—

"It is not Saint Agnes alone, Mamzelle Denise : no, nor even Lhoeac, though I grant that with me these count for most ; but this day you have saved God knows how much of Guienne, aye, or of France itself."

IV

The struggle with Saint Agnes might be no more than a struggle of a day's duration, followed by a slowly ripening victory ; but the fight with the plague was long-drawn and full of fierce vicissitudes. July halted miserably after June, and August trod slowly on the heels of July before the rout was complete, and within these weeks in the midst of the stress and strain of the battle there came into the life of Denise de Lhoeac that which never left it while life lasted. Of these vicissitudes there is no need to say much. They were no mo . . . the

common, gradual subsidence of the pestilence, and its sudden recrudescences consequent upon headstrong folly. Once it was pure bravado, once it was a drunken orgy, and once it was a cause which later on must be detailed more particularly, that gave the pest new life. But all these outbreaks, no matter what their origin, had to be met, stayed, and throttled, and well it was for Denise de Lhoëac that an ally came to her aid about the end of the sixth week of the struggle.

Never was excommunicated city cut off from human sympathy more fully than was Saint Agnes cut off from the outer world except through two channels. Though Denise never allowed her to break the protective cordon, *ma mie Maman* up at Château Lhoëac did all for the stricken town that a woman's love could do in bringing to the edge of the neutral zone such comforts and aids to nursing as the forlorn wretches had never dreamed of in their wealthiest hours. These were for the life that passeth, and counted for much, for many a life passed the gentler because of them; but for the life that is eternal there was thought and service of another kind, and the Carmelite Fathers of Saint Joseph spent themselves ungrudgingly.

The two who had followed Denise that first terrible day speedily became nine; within eight days the nine were levelled down to six; and thenceforward until the end of the battle not a week passed but one or more of these white-frocked

warriors of the Lord, uncomplaining, diligent, heroic souls, true soldiers of their Master, laid down life without a murmur, and ever into the gapped ranks there stepped another unconscious hero, as devoted as he was simple-hearted.

But towards the close of July, as Denise was crossing the one roadway of Saint Agnes, an unaccustomed sound made her turn sharply. It was the ring of horse-hoofs on the smooth cobbles, and of horses there should be none in Saint Agnes, since what use were they to men who were pent in hold and could neither go out nor come in? Being turned, she saw Captain Patcham walking by the stirrup of a stranger, and for all her astonishment she had time, as the sun shone full upon both their faces, to note with a sudden pain at her heart how sorrowfully worn and aged Father Roger had grown. His grizzled hair was frank grey, his face shrunken and furrowed, his beard gone white, his shoulders stooped. The hill of life had been crossed at a stride, and already he was half-way down the further side. The weeks of trouble and anxious thought had bitten deep. Then, with a sigh that the cost must be paid by others as well as by herself, he went forward to meet the two.

"It is not my fault, Mademoiselle," began Roger, with an upward gesture; "and indeed we can do with another man who has no fear and can use authority. Give Saint Agnes courage and you give it health. Monsieur, here——"

But it seemed that it was not Monsieur's habit to let another speak for him.

"Let me tell my own story," said he, and Denise as she watched him sitting there bareheaded in the sunshine, thought him as goodly a man as had crossed Lhoëac these many months; broad shouldered, big-limbed, muscular as to frame, bright, frank, and sunny of face; and bearing, as a man should, his eight-and-twenty years as if he were unconscious of them. "Yet there are so many tags to the talk that where to begin is a puzzle. There is the coward's terror that watches beyond your border, for, on my faith, they are in a fine pucker at Clazonnè; there is the whispering of devotion and self-sacrifice that half-shames even the terror; there is my unworthy self—these and other matters, all differing and yet all bound up into one like the strands of a rope."

"Begin with yourself, Monsieur. We have terror enough in Saint Agnes, and the less said of—the other the better."

"Then of these presently. Mademoiselle, I am from Italy, where I have served France, and yet, I pray God, done no despite to the cause of our Holy Father. Nay—and I do not say it to boast, but that you may know who and what I am—no more than three months back his Holiness named me Lord of Casera; for I have as yet no patrimony of my own. That it was honourably won, my friend," and he turned to Roger with a nod, "I have that upon my

breast to show, and told in a language you have known this many a year. Again I say, this is not to boast; in these bustling, troubled times scars are common enough, God knows—more common a thousand times than a woman's brave self-forgetfulness and abnegation; but coming as I do I must needs be my own herald, and it is for the good of all that you receive me frankly from the first. To sum it up, I am a gentleman and a soldier; am neither rich nor poor, and hold that Christian faith which fears God, honours the King, and loves one woman, who, by your leave, shall be nameless. Is that enough of myself, Mademoiselle, and you, my friend?"

"I am content, Monsieur," answered Denise, with a glance at Roger, who replied bluntly—

"I also, and the more so that what is done can't be mended. You have stretched out an arm further than you can draw it back, young gentleman, which my grey hair tells me is a fool's deed in a man."

"Who seeks to draw it back? And when my folly is clear I will admit it. But that brings me to the terror beyond Lhoeac," answered the other, dismounting as he spoke and slipping the bridle into the crook of his arm. "That you have cowards enough here is plain to be seen," and he nodded towards a group or two of haggard folk loitering upon the roadway and eyeing the newcomer curiously; "but the cowards beyond Lhoeac

are still more plentiful, and with less excuses. At Clazonnè, there, where they housed me for a night, every soul, from my lord to my lord's scullion, goes softly for fear of Saint Agnes, and yet every man-jack would cheerily face three in the field and think nought of it. Now if a man but sneezes he is driven to the beasts for his fellowship, and not a roysterer of them all dare drink himself drunk lest he hiccup himself to a sudden end for the health of the rest. That the folk here do not thank you for your cordon, Mademoiselle, I can well believe; yet—and I say it in bitter shame for our humanity—had you not penned them here more had perished by violence than have died of the plague. Small mercy would they have found from their fellows. So much for the second tag to my tale; now for the third."

While he was speaking they had moved slowly forward, and for a dozen paces there was silence. Thus far his tongue had run freely enough, but Monsieur de Casera plainly found it hard to put the rest of his story into words.

"We from Italy," he said at last, with a swift glance at Denise that for all its keenness was frankly friendly and no more, "have, I think, this saving grace, that we honour womanhood beyond the rest of the nations. It may be that our art taught us. Mademoiselle, when I heard at Clazonnè how that you——"

"Oh, Monsieur, Monsieur!" cried Denise, stop-

ping him short with a gesture, "are we women smaller souled than men, less pitiful, less tender, less moved by sorrow and suffering, that in one of us you make so much of that which in a man were pure duty and a thing of common course? Or is it that in Italy you have learned the trick of gallantry, and think that to please us you must needs tickle our senses through our ears? If the one, then you pay us a poor compliment and I can give you no thanks; if the other, alas! that St. Agnes is no place for gallant speeches and smooth words. When life is grim earnest, Monsieur, these courtly niceties count for nought. Nay, they are like a jest by a graveside."

"Mademoiselle," answered de Casera eagerly, "believe me I am no fop to mock you with empty phrases. What I heard at Clazonnè stirred me to the very soul, and I thanked God the world held one woman great enough to point men the way they should go. Great, I say, great; for belittle it as you may, this that you have done is no small thing, and it shames the men of Guienne."

"Hush, Monsieur, hush! you slander the dead," cried she, flushing at the sharp vehemence of his speech. "Wait until I show you the nine graves where lie the monks who prove the manhood of Guienne."

"Oh, the monks! the monks!" said he contemptuously. "God's sheep without a will of their own. They do that which they must do and fight with

their backs to a wall. I give no man credit for the courage that has no hope."

"Wait and see," answered Denise softly, the tears rising to her eyes. "God's sheep you call them, and your sneer hits the truth. I pray the day may come when I shall be of the same fold."

"To that prayer, Mademoiselle," replied de Casera, looking her boldly in the face, "I have no amen to add, if the fold be one upon earth."

A cry from a house near by set a stay on any answer Denise might have made, and when they met again—as they did within the hour—they met as comrades and fellow-labourers rather than as strangers, but with hands over-full for much talk.

Nor was Denise long in finding that she had gained both a brain and a right arm, the one clear and the other strong. It was not de Casera's first wrestle with the pestilence, and with his fewer years he brought to the struggle a nimbler wit and more kindly temper than did Roger Patcham. What the Englishman effected by blunt authority, herding the folk like so much cattle, brainless, and only to be driven, de Casera won by sheer good-will and a tactful tongue. No task daunted him, no labour deterred him, no danger gave him pause; let the evil be what it might, his cheer and his courage were alike unappalled.

With him, too, came new methods. He it was who hacked the narrow windows into thrice their size, letting into the hot, foul hovels both light and

air; who closed the church and the market that there might be no close huddling of the folk, who built airy sheds for the sick, who set the men and women to labour, the children to play, bidding those laugh and sing who could, and so, little by little, won the people back to their common wholesome round of life. With the women he had his quip and his jest, florid enough, perhaps, to set them giggling, but he knew his folk; with the men there were tales of the wars, so full of the rush of life that even their stolidity gaped; with the children he had his games of strange lands. Nought came amiss to him. His humour matched the needs he met with, so that within an hour Denise had seen him wipe the death-sweat from the face of Marie Tron and romp madly with a two-year bairn as if there was nothing in the broad world but laughter.

As to Denise herself, he vexed her with no second praise, but day by day, unknown to herself, she grew to lean upon his broad sympathies, trust to his quick judgment, and appeal to his failing resource. Day by day, too, though she hardly knew, the burden of, as it were, personal responsibility slipped from her shoulders to his. Her eyes lightened, the careworn tension that had lined her face relaxed, and more than once the laughter that was hers by right of youth came back to her, and she caught herself singing, all unconsciously, snatches of Olivier Basselin's songs, as she had sung twenty years before to soothe the

outworn, weary age of old Guy de Lhoeac. That new order of things had come to her as well as to Saint Agnes she knew, but that it had its root in more than frank friendship she did not know until Father Roger opened her eyes.

It was no more than the third week of de Casera's coming to Saint Agnes, but in such times when every flaw in a man is sought out by a thousand worries, as a smith tries armour with his hammer, weeks stand for years.

"God send such a master to Lhoeac," said Captain Patcham, as he finished telling Denise of some new labour the Italian had invented for the heartening of the men. "Womenfolk are beyond me, but it is my business to know men. God grant, Mademoiselle, that I may see children playing about the old halls before I die."

But instead of the blood to the cheeks that Roger looked for, Denise paled and her face grew hard.

"Its mistress must be its master," she answered curtly, and turned into her tent.

But as the flap of its curtain fell, her heart was very bitter against that earnest ecclesiastic, Monseigneur the Cardinal of Saint-Seurin.

THE HOUSE OF RELIGION

I

THAT night Denise slept but little. Subtle powers were at war within her, and through their sharp antagonism her peace of mind was rent to tatters. Some men, and not a few women, would have confused the issue knit between herself and her conscience, but not so Denise. That my Lord Bishop had trapped her into marriage for his own purposes, playing upon her as Pan upon his pipes and caring nothing for the pain of the reed if but the music pleased himself, she now believed. But though she had been caught by a flat lie, brazened out and sworn to in the very face of heaven, it had been none the less a marriage; nor was she the less a wife; and that Denise la Clazonné should think twice of a man not her husband was an abashment and a disgrace. Nay, it was a blank surprise. She had not so much as dreamed that such a thing was possible.

She was a wife, she told herself—a wife, a wife;

and if she had allowed herself to forget, she must forget no longer.

That way lay duty, that way lay religion. Of all God's unhappy creatures there was none she scorned like the woman who could put off her honour like a loose glove and think no shame of the nakedness and to her overwrought emotion it seemed as if she had rubbed skirts with such a one. Then into the lists of battle love leaped, all nature in his train, and crying out against the barren desolation of the time to come. In an instant Denise was in an agony of revolt. Was a monk's chicane to rob her of the best of life? to send her out into the world to feed upon the husks, bound, but not by cords of love; a wife and yet no wife? But that brought the circle round again, and for the first time realising to the full of what she had been cozened, she turned upon her pillow and wept. Hitherto she had known so little of love, and that she might have known so much she now knew from a score of trifles to which her eyes had been shut. Let a man be an Arthur, a Roland, a Bayard, aye, or even a Galahad, and there will ever be a subtle difference between his chivalry and his love, let the love be never so silent, never so repressed; and who so keen to note such subtleties as a woman? and of all women the one to whom these subtleties go out!

She had been cheated, wronged. Therefore Denise took no shame that she had unwittingly given what was unsought in words. The giving

was nature's, not hers. Her shame was rather partly this, that she had won what she could not openly return ; and now to her own pain was to be added the greater sorrow of paining the man who had so suddenly and so fully grown into her life. That she who had sinned should suffer was no more than bitter justice, and in her moments of reprobation she held her sin to be great, but that the innocent should suffer with her set an edge upon her distress, nor could the universality of the law comfort her. In the end, true woman-like, she lost sight of her own grief and loss in seeking how she might best spare him.

That, more than the revolt of nature within herself, was the cause of her white night. After the first hot upheaval of impotent bitterness against Henri de Lhoeac, after the fierce impulse to seize the present blessing she hungered after, to cry "Evil, be thou my good," and let the future care for itself, there arose her true self, that, grappling with the lower forces within her, threw them and held them under. There had been the storm, there had been the fire almost consuming, and now there came the still, small voice. The good of the man she loved was her greatest good, and to the shaping of that she bent her thought.

Shrewd and cool-witted now that she was mistress of herself, Denise knew no easy task was set her to do. This François de Casera—and even as she plotted how to put him from her she almost

triumphed in the difficulty since it exalted the man she loved—was no weak-willed lad to be turned from his purpose by a cold whim. Let her believe her nature as she might by word or act, he would never believe the fraud against herself. No, she had tried him, and he was too true a man for that. What man worth a woman's love, and who had plumbed and measured mind and spirit as de Casera had plumbed and measured hers, would accept her at the valuation of a coquette even upon her own showing? Besides, to play such a part was to sin against womanhood, and it was no part of her creed that a sin should cure a sin. So, while the mellow night drew to its coolest, on through the silent hours of the greatest darkness, when even old Mother Earth herself appears to sleep, so tremendous are her silences, past the first slow paling of the stars and their sudden, swift extinguishment as the broadening dawn led on the day, she lay thinking, thinking, and in the end turned upon her pillow and prayed God of His mercy to be gracious to François de Casera, and so left it. Then at last she fell asleep, and slept late.

When she came out into the life of the new day, it was to find that the problem which distressed her was, if not solved, at least so far set aside that she need give it no further immediate thought. At the door of the tent Father Roger waited her, and his wrinkled face was full of anxious trouble.

"The fat's in the fire again," said he, "and if it

were not that 'tis a priest who has spilled it I would think the devil himself had been at work. Here were we with this accursed pestilence stamped out, or at least held check and cramped within bounds so that the end was a matter of days, and now it's running afresh through the town like a fire through a pine-wood. Visitation of God? Visitation of all the fiends of hell, say I."

"What?" cried Denise, putting her hand to her head like one dazed. "Again? again? And how have the poor Carmelites sent it going?"

"Who said the Carmelites? I said a priest. The Carmelites are kindly folk enough, and preach the love of God rather than hell-fire, as the Church should. But this fellow, one would think him filled with brimstone to the throat to hear him talk, and he has Saint Agnes mad with terror. If it were not for his black frock, and that the ninnies of women hold him for a prophet and so would raise a riot, I would pitch him neck and crop outside the lines and bid our men run him through if he doubled back. But he's a priest, d'ye see, Mamzelle, and what's a priest but God's woman? He's no man, that's certain, or at least you cannot trounce him like a man. Oh, these wenches! these fools of wenches! there is not one of them all but a priest can turn—aye, I know, I know, my tongue runs away with me, but as to Saint Agnes, what I say is not far from the truth."

At his last words, Denise, pale from her sleepless

night and pitifully hollow-eyed, had flushed to temples. Father Roger spoke more truth than guessed, and as her thoughts flew back to Bordeaux his random bolt went home and she winced. she had no mind at that time, and indeed for reason, to defend the women of Saint Agnes, so let his tirade pass unchallenged.

Begin at the beginning, for to me it is all a confusion," she said gently. "Who is this priest you speak of? and what has he done to set you raging? But Roger Patcham had at last seen how sadly the Denise of the morning differed from the Denise of the night, and in his fear for her his wrathful and unwonted wordiness was checked. Compared with his darling's well-being it was a small matter that Saint Agnes should sup its own bitter broth.

"Is there aught amiss?" said he anxiously and trying hard to cover his fear with a brave face; "you have no sickness, now? No swimming in the head? No catch in the breath as if a knife pricked you? No—no—good Lord, Mademoiselle, it's not—it's not——" And then, rough soldier of fortune though he was, and camp-hardened against emotion, his voice broke and he stood before her stammering.

"No, old friend, no; have no fear for me," answered Denise quickly, a sudden flush of comfort warming her heart. Here was love at her very door, and if not the love she had determined to put from her, still love that was very tender, very honest, and very true. "I have had bad dreams, that is all;

and now that I am awake and in the sunshine again they will be no more than dreams."

"You are sure?" he persisted, "you are sure? Remember, Mademoiselle, in half an hour we can have you at the Château."

"What? and break the cordon? What would become of Lhoeac?"

"Cordon! Lhoeac!" he echoed contemptuously. "What are fifty cordons—aye, and fifty Lhoeacs to boot—if you were in question? Saint Agnes is well enough for these swine, but for Denise de Lhoeac in her hour of need! By the saints, but that were a fool's trick!"

"Then it is well for Lhoeac," said she, smiling at his vehemence, "that it is no more than a night's shadows which have already half-lifted. In my dream I was between two worlds, and the abyss on either side frightened me. Now what of this priest? Who is he? What does he seek? Whence came he? Ah!"—and she broke off suddenly as if a new thought had struck her—"you remember Brother Martin, do you not?"

"Yes," answered Patcham, wondering at this fresh twist in her talk, and not a little troubled by the irrelevance; "though it is strange that you should. Why, it is twenty years——"

"Nevertheless I remember. He was a Dominican; is this monk, by chance, a Dominican also?"

"It is strange, I say again, that you should speak of Brother Martin in the same breath with this

fellow, seeing that he is Martin's very twin ; boned, slender, lean-chapped, and with eyes t flame and dull like smouldering dead-wood. I he is no Dominican ; a Cordelier, I think, but one or other of the Franciscan branches, and so sturdy hater of Saint Dominic. Trust a daw peck at a daw. But what matters which he i He is here, and if he were a Dominican he cou be no worse than he is."

"Because Martin was of my uncle's sending said Denise slowly, "and I thought, perhaps——

"No fear, Mademoiselle, no fear ; this fellow came in by way of the south, and Monsieur d Lhoëac's cardinalate lies to the north."

"And the longest way round is the shortest way there, says the proverb. He came by way of the south ? What then ?"

"Our people, like the fools they are, let him through because of his skirt and cord. By my faith, if I had once seen his face he would never have set foot in Saint Agnes ; a proper faggot he is ! But for their poor soul's sake they must needs keep on the sunny side of the church, and so passed him in without a question ; and there he is, preaching and cursing on the church steps, and crying out on us all for infidels because the door is locked."

"That was Monsieur de Casera's doing, and I will not have it undone," said Denise sharply. "The sense of it is plain, though we ourselves did not see it ; the people crowding together for worship spreads the taint."

"I agree, Mademoiselle, I agree; but there is the closed door with, as he says, God shut from the people (as if an inch plank could keep the Almighty out or in), and on the step is this firebrand in a black frock calling down judgment on us all because of the unserved altar. Twice I have told him the reason, and for answer he flings 'Atheist!' in my face, and says what matters the body if the soul be saved, which is all very well, but when the Lord God gave us bodies He meant us to take care of them! Then he turns to the people, and——"

"Where is Monsieur de Casera?"

"There on the steps with him, and if it were not that the poor fools who are gaping below would suffer for it I would ask nothing better than to hear the layman teach the priest God's way of life. My faith! but it would do the church good to hear the truth at times, and this Franciscan, who has no more wit than he was born with, would hear somewhat! A shrewd tongue has Monsieur de Casera."

"And what of the people?"

Roger Patcham paused before answering. In his perplexity up went a lean hand to his beard, combing it with diligence, and he shifted his feet uneasily on the crisped grass.

"Oh! the people?" he said cautiously, and keeping watchful eyes upon Denise. "What are they better than stubble waiting for the first spark, and so are soon alight; but, by the Lord, let them blaze beyond reason, and I shall see to it that they are as

soon stamped back into stubble again, and if there be some that are burnt, why, 'tis their own fault."

"Do you mean," cried Denise, starting forward and catching him by the sleeve, "that they might turn upon Monsieur de Casera because of the monk? Be plain, Captain Patcham, be plain. For answer, Father Roger turned sharply, his hollowed hand to his ear.

"They have done it," said he, shooting one quick glance at Denise. "Hark at that! The spark has caught and the blaze is roaring already. Bide here, Mademoiselle, bide here. The stamping out may come less easy than the words."

Catching up his dangling scabbard, he tucked it under his left arm and ran stiffly across the grass, calling loudly as he went upon Lhoeac's men for succour. But above the shout Denise heard the rough rumble of many voices, an incoherent strife of tongues swelling to a hoarse and vicious roar, and gathering together her cumbersome, loose skirts she followed Roger Patcham, running her hardest. The problem of the night was in a fair way to a settlement from which there could be no appeal, no turning back.

II

Two-thirds along the sinuous line of roadway that made up the bulk of Saint Agnes the street

broadened into the market-place, an insignificant cobble-paved square into which faced the squat, ugly, and no less insignificant village church dedicated to the patron Saint of Lhoeac. Raised about fifteen feet above the level of the road, it was approached by a flight of twenty narrow steps, rough-hewn and worn by the drift of time and weather rather than by the pious diligence of worshippers; Saint Agnes was as slumbrous and placid in its devotions as in all else that pertained to life. Simple and unpretentious even to unsightliness, the end abutting upon the street was broken in but two places, a heavily-moulded rose-window placed high in the whitewashed wall, and the great door which, until the coming of the pestilence, had never within the memory of man been closed from dawn to sunset. Saint Agnes was not addicted to much prayer, it was for want of the opportunity to pray.

But if Saint Agnes in the days of its ease had been remiss in its devotions, the weight of its punishment had surely wrought repentance. The market square now teemed with life that fought and struggled and changed itself from humanity to the brute in its passionate endeavour to draw near to the house of God. Not a face in all the crowd but was turned to the church steps, and in their zeal men and women strove and jostled, trampling the weaker under foot. Truly the friar of Saint Francis had reason to be proud at having

worked so speedy a reformation, for never had miracle mystery, no, nor Pere Guignol himself thus stirred Saint Agnes.

An ominous reformation and a portentous stirring at any time, but chiefly so when self-control was worn thin. There was not a soul in all the crowd upon whom the past weeks had not left their seal. The already old had grown ancient, the middle-aged old, the very lads and maidens had lost the freshness of their youth and taken on that sombre weary resignation which is so early the heritage of the peasant. Across every face there had crept a little of the solemnity of the eternal world, softening its hard coarseness, and refining the blunt grossness that is first-born child to unthinking ignorance. Labouring day by day with the brutes in the field, and with little thought beyond a brute's, they had grown up from childhood stolid and boorish. Then this sudden and overwhelming anguish had come upon them, teaching them thought and sympathy, and the spirit within them, stretching itself stirringly as it were, had shaken off its accustomed sloth.

All this Denise had seen, and seeing it had taken comfort and courage. A bitter root may bear fruit whereby a man may live, and therefore from the grave of so many of its children it was possible that Saint Agnes might be quickened to a new manhood. But as she turned out of the narrow, rutted by-path which led between the houses to the dusty and no less rutted street, her courage failed and for a

moment she stopped short, gasping. But only for a moment. By a paradox the very sight that staggered her gave her strength. In place of the courage of consolation there came the greater courage of love, and setting both hands to her panting sides, she again ran on, outstripping Roger Patcham in what she deemed a race for a life.

What had happened was this : going his morning rounds amongst the sick folk, the unwonted stir in the market-place, and the way in which, like wasps to honey, the idlers were drawn there, roused de Casera's curiosity ; and he, too, made his way along the street. On the eastern side of the square was the church of Saint Agnes, and midway up the steps stood a tall, gaunt figure, clad in a loose black robe from the lean throat to the sandalled feet, and bound round the waist by a rusty swinging cord—a nervous, energetic figure, for its arms swayed like flails in threshing time, and the dusty feet were never still for an instant.

That in spite of the cordon there should be a stranger in Saint Agnes was surprise enough to set de Casera staring, but the monk's words were a still greater amazement ; and as the broken phrases came home to him, and as he noted how already the priest swayed his hearers, Messire François grew hard of face. The Cordelier was in a fair way to wreck utterly a three weeks' reputation for even temper ! Shouldering his way through the crowd which now clustered five deep along the roadway, and over-

flowed up the lower steps, de Casera unceremoniously laid his hand on the monk's collar.

"Hulloa, friend!" he cried, "what Bishop gave thee license to preach in Saint Agnes? and a creature too, that is as black as thy frock!"

With a wrench of his thin shoulders the friar shook himself free, and rounded on his assailant.

"'Tis all of a piece!" he thundered, shifting his anathema in general to de Casera in particular. "God's house shut against the people and God's messenger mishandled before them. Small wonder that the curse has fallen. What saith the Word? Repent quickly, or I will come and take thy candlestick from its place. Already I see——"

"Softly, man, softly," said de Casera. "We know our own sorrows better than thou canst tell them to us. If thou art here to bless and comfort the poor folk, good and well, bide here and do your Master's work; but if thou art here to curse and add evil to evil we must needs close thy mouth, since we cannot send thee packing. No ranting, priest, no ranting; the people are like tow, and we dare risk no sparks."

He might as well have spoken to the barred doorway. Like many another of his cloth, the Franciscan had a larger notion of his mission upon earth. Round he swung to the growing crowd, and for a moment there was silence. Then, shaking back his cowl, he flung out his arms and stood staring down at the mob, like a death's-head set on a black cross.

"Hear him!" he cried, "hear him, ye mis-shepherded sheep. Speak comfort, saith he! Who can dare speak comfort till your sin be cleansed? Not I, who am the messenger and the servant of the truth. These be your guides, these be your teachers; a spawn of Satan that would close the mouths of God's anointed priest as they have closed His house. Your altars are dark, the perpetual sacrifice unoffered, the incense of your prayers no more ascends from the holy place unto the Lord, and ye are accursed, accursed. Your dead lie in swathes to the reaper because of your offences, and ye go down to the pit unhouseled, unassoiled. Hark! hark!" Outward he flung an open hand, setting the other behind his ear, while his eyes glowed in their caverns. "Alas! for you! ye brands of the burning; I can hear the very roar of hell."

The five deep had grown to triple five, and on either side the flanks of the crowd had drawn round de Casera and the monk, so that they stood in the centre of a much curved crescent and yet with a clear space surrounding them. Lashed from its ingrained stolidity by the monk's denunciations, murmurs and groans rose from the throng in increasing volume as the quick infectious sympathy of numbers asserted itself, murmurs against de Casera and all he stood for, groans that were inarticulate prayer and inarticulate confession of sin in one. Women whose faces were already white

with sorrowful vigils grew yet more ghastly as new terrors of perdition seized upon them; men conscience-stricken and vaguely fearful of they knew not what, hid their alarm in a half-simulated wrath that was presently to slip into an unreasoning lust for blood. The very uncomprehending children caught the contagion, and shrieked and wept as they clung to their mothers' gowns. The beast that never bides in the French peasant was awake and making ready for a spring, and was the more dangerous because fear was the goad rather than wrath. The Seigneurs had reason to know him well! Let him once wet his chaps with blood, let the madness of slaughter once fully possess him, and neither love, nor loyalty, nor tradition, nor authority would hold him back, nor innocent womanhood be spared. Denise de Lhoeac would go down with the rest, her service and her degree alike forgotten. And this de Casera knew well, and as the turmoil round him swelled in volume he groaned aloud in his impotence and despair.

Meanwhile the Franciscan had pushed forward to his advantage. In impassioned speech, indignant, wrathful, pleading, and afire with glowing rhetoric such as might have fallen from Peter the Hermit preaching the Crusade, he appealed to every sentiment in turn—faith toward God, obedience to the church, loyalty to religion, divine anger and judgment to come, the terrors of hell, death present and death eternal, shame, penitence, damnation; and as

he thundered forth his denunciations and anathemas he beat upon his breast, frothing at the mouth in the frenzy of his wild outburst.

A born orator, his voice followed the swiftly changing tenor of each thought, and to every shift of mood he swayed the people so that they rang responsive as harp-strings to the trembling of the wind. He had Saint Agnes in a leash, and wheresoever he hulload there they would go. They roared, they sobbed, they surged, they shook, they groaned, they wept, they cursed, according as it pleased him ; and in the end those upon the higher steps fell upon their knees, mumbling. There it was that instinctively the orator became the actor, shifting from the one art unconsciously to the other. The emotion of the audience recoiled upon the speaker. Stopping abruptly in a half-said sentence, he stared down at the convulsed women kneeling at his feet, then cried out with a shaking voice—

“Right, my children, right ; let us pray that if possible this sin may be forgiven.”

Turning, he ran, two stairs at a stride, up the steps, crossed the open space at the top that led to the church, and flung himself down on his knees at the shut door, his head thrown back and his hands raised in an agony of intercession. Behind him there was the flawless silence which follows the elevation of the host, and of the entire throng de Casera alone stood upright, disconcerted and undetermined how to act.

He was in the cleft of a stick, and the pinch to him was a sore one. That the mad blasphemy, blasphemy he held it to be, would at the last in murder and outrage for the love of God he had no doubt, even as he knew that the man who thought to stay them would, at the first at least draw the rage down upon his own head. But as he watched the strained excitement of the mob, and saw how the terrors of religion and an inconsequence of remorse jointly possessed it, the danger of leaving the fanatic to complete his work seemed the greater. The fuel would blaze, that was plain, but that the fuel grew drier with every lurid sentence was also plain. If there must be outrage, it was better that it should have a clear purpose, and perhaps the slaying of the one would save the many, though François de Casera the many stood for Denise de Lhoëac and no more.

Wheeling in his turn, he followed the monk up the stairway, and, even while he knelt, caught him for the second time roughly by the collar.

"Whom dost thou serve?" he cried, wrenching him round so that he faced the crowd across his shoulder, "Satan, or the God of peace, that thou drivest these to madness with thy intolerance?"

"Peace!" echoed the other, staring him back, no whit afraid. "What hast thou to do with peace? There is no peace to the wicked, saith my God. What! you have barred the door of peace against the people, and when they make its threshold a

sanctuary you would dare to profane even this poor shadow of holy things? The abomination of desolation standeth where it ought not to stand, and if the Lord had not sent me to these people they would have been even as Sodom and as Gomorrah."

Up again went the trembling hands that knew no tremor of fear, and the sonorous voice broke out afresh, so ringing clear that every syllable rolled unslurred to the furthest corner of the square—

"Judgment, O Lord God, judgment upon these who would impiously thrust themselves betwixt Thee and Thy penitent people. Shoot out Thy arrows, O God, and destroy them; cast forth Thy lightning and scatter them; send Thy strength from above and deliver me from the hand of strange children, whose right hand is a right hand of falsehood."

"Be silent, fool!" cried de Casera between his clenched teeth, and shaking the monk with such a good will that force compelled what command had failed to bring about, and for very chattering of teeth the wild, imprecatory prayer was cut short. "And you, fools like himself, to be moved by his madness, stand back, lest between you ye force me to give him a cause for cursing. Stand back, I say. What! ye will not? Then, in God's name come on, and let this scoundrel monk have the murder on his soul he so hungers after."

As de Casera seized the monk for the second time the ejaculations and muttered groans of the

crowd swelled into a noisy clamour. Single voices took form and called out menaces across the babble and with every minute the uproar grew in volume. Then it was that Denise had followed Roger Patchard in his flight across the grass. But as the monastic trumpet-tones cut through the hubbub the inertia of the mob woke to action, and the packed throng swayed forward and upward with the one impulse. It was as if the lever of some vast machine which filled the square from limit to limit had been touched, forcing the whole mass into sudden activity. Upward the line swept, beating down in its advance the weak and those who had fallen upon their knees, passing over them as a river that has burst its banks sweeps across and covers the stones that lie in its line of progress, upward to the level space at the top of the stairway, and there the tide stayed, its line heaving and undulating with the pressure from behind. De Casera's sword was out, and for all its madness Saint Agnes was not of the stuff that makes martyrs.

It was while he thus kept the crowd at bay, his left hand still grasping the collar of the monk's cassock, that Denise, panting with haste and an anxious dread of evil, reached the fringe of the throng in the road below.

"Make way," she cried sharply, laying a firm hand on the nearest shoulder. "What! is the pestilence not enough that you must needs add murder to it? Shame upon you, men! Is this your

thanks to the man who risked his life for you? Shame on you, too, wives and mothers! Where is your womanhood that you can thus egg these cowards on to murder? Are you all alike turned to brute beasts? Make way for Denise de Lhoeac."

"For God's sake, turn back, Mademoiselle," cried de Casera through the partial silence that followed her words. Saint Agnes had not as yet flung off the spell of old authority, nor had its stolid wits quite conceived that its mistress shared the maledictions levelled at the stranger. "The folk are mad with this fool's girding at them, and will do you a hurt."

"By God's grace," answered she, looking swiftly up at him, and then as swiftly back over the expectant sea of faces, "I am here to cure their madness. As to the hurt, there was never yet a time when a Lhoeac feared Saint Agnes. Is it not so, my children?" And, indeed, she was right, though not altogether in the sense the people understood. It took more than even a word-drunken Saint Agnes to frighten a Lhoeac.

III

For a moment there was a pause. De Casera was right, and the madness was there, though force of custom held it in check. Then a woman's voice said—

"Let her pass, an' God bless her ! She nursed my Jean to life when every soul turned from him. The saints keep you safe, Mamzelle."

"And so they will," answered Denise. "Make way, my children, make way."

To right and left, with much struggle and stress because of the thronging, the crowd parted, leaving a narrow laneway clear to the open space at the steps' head. Up this Denise passed—erect and stern of face, and with a faint flush colouring the overnight pallor of her cheeks. That de Casera was still unharmed she saw and thanked God, but she was under no illusions. The true trial of strength was yet to come, and if victory lay with the Cordelier, or even the appearance of victory, the problem that had held her sleepless would have a swift solution. Then the crowd closed in again, compact as before, and shutting out Captain Roger Patcham ; nor, in the then temper of the people, did the Englishman dare seek to force a passage. For the time the cue lay with another.

For all that Denise was a woman and a lover of peace, the instinct born of many generations of men of war taught her boldness and the worth of the first stroke. A crowd loves success, and its sympathies follow victory. On the topmost step she halted and faced the mob, now hushed except for that indefinable rustle inseparable from packed humanity upon its feet.

"Back, back !" she cried, motioning with an open

hand as she spoke. "We have need of greater room. Let no man come within three steps of the terrace. And you, Monsieur de Casera, put up your sword. We are here in Saint Agnes to save life, and not to take it. Also, loose the monk; if he has done wrong he must abide by the wrong, but the punishment is my affair, not yours. We admit no right of justice in Lhoeac save those of the King and Denise de Lhoeac: is that not so, my children?" But abstract authority was nothing to Saint Agnes, and the crowd answered her never a word.

"Now Master Monk," she went on, her clear voice growing sterner, "what brawl is this thou hast raised? God grant thou and thy hot-head's folly have not brought a grievous wrong on my people."

Released by de Casera, the Franciscan had risen, and now, his nervous fingers twisting the cords of his disordered robe, he faced Denise. A dramatic picture they made, these three on the clear sweep of the terrace, with the flat, unsightly, weather-stained wall of the church as a background to throw them into relief—a picture in sober tones and yet with its artistic contrasts, the pure white of the woman's garments finding a sharp foil in the gaunt friar's black frock. As to de Casera, he had drawn to one side with undisguised reluctance, and stood watching the monk sharply, his scabbard caught up in his left hand so that the hilt lay frankly ready to his right. For the moment Denise was mistress, but let affairs take a threatening twist, and he

would play the master, if it were but for three strokes.

"The wrong was here before me," answered the monk harshly, smiting the church door with the flat of his hand as he spoke, so that the emptiness within rang with a hollow boom. "The wrong lies there—in shutting out God from the people."

"Neither I, nor you, Priest, can do that," replied Denise: "no, nor yet your church, bishops, cardinals, and— Ah! I had forgotten. What is the message from the Cardinal de Saint-Seurin? Thou art here from him? Eh, is it not so? Come, Monk, the truth, the truth. What saith his Eminence?"

"I am no man's messenger, and know nought of him of whom you speak. As to the truth, that you shall have, and bitter you shall find it."

"Presently, presently. Swear to me first that thou hast had no dealings with Henri de Lhoac, Bishop of Libourne and Cardinal of Saint-Seurin, that thou art not here at his instance, nor for his purposes covert or open. Mark now, there is no room there for a quibble."

"I am here upon my Master's business, at his instance and for his purposes. Bishops? cardinals? What are they! Again I say I know nothing of him of whom you speak."

"Swear, man, swear."

"A Christian man's word is his oath, but since you will have it so, I swear it."

Lifting the bronze cross that hung upon his breast,

he kissed it, going down reverently on his knees as he did so.

"That you are honest makes for peace for us all, since your bite is without venom," said Denise. "Let us cry back. Briefly, now, how canst thou, a man of God, justify this brawl?"

"Because I am what I am." Rising to his feet, he faced her as he had faced Saint Agnes at the first, and Denise was conscious that a sound like the sighing of the wind passed across the silent crowd. It was the people drawing in their breath to listen. "What? In the time of His affliction you put a slight on the mercy of God, you shut Him out from part or lot in the healing of Saint Agnes, and when I, His——"

"For shame, Monk! for shame! Can bars and bolts shut out God? I tell thee, man, He has been present here in Saint Agnes these last weeks as He never was behind that shut door since the wall went up. Oh, you stare, you stare, but it may well be that you have so long worshipped the God of Judgment that you have forgotten the God of Love and Mercy, and so know little of His ways for all your friar's frock. Nay, nay, nay, it is not always the priest's turn to preach. To hearken to you one would think that the laying on of hands gave the gift of tongues, and so, by my faith, it would seem to do for wordiness, though not always for sound sense. This is my turn, or rather," and a half-smile flickered into the gravity of her face,

shone in her eyes an instant and then died out, leaving it as intent, stern, and sorrowful as before. "I shall let the people judge. For the most part poor souls, they have to listen whether they choose or not, while you high holinesses in the pulpit pound and pelt them at your long liking. Which shall speak, my children, Denise de Lhoeac or this black monk of the sour face, who cometh from we know not where? Denise de Lhoeac? Thou art answered, Master Monk, though I little thought the day would come when I should preach to the church!"

Twice the Franciscan had sought to break in upon her, but Denise was in no common mood, and, man and priest though he was, she talked him down. None knew better than she that she was fighting for the life of the man she loved; for, though the people were quiet beyond her expectation, the ominous indrawn breath as the monk had answered was both a threat and a warning. In such a case, and for such a stake, it would take more than one man to silence a woman's tongue, and the man of the robe had been beaten with his own weapons. But once Saint Agnes had declared for her, she paused for breath, half hoping the monk would persist. She knew the people to their furthest hair's breadth, and from defence would have turned to attack, confident they would follow her as blindly as a bare half-hour before they had followed the stranger. But the monk was either

too astute or too honest to take advantage of her silence, for, though his mobile face showed the heat of his impatience, he held his peace.

"If thou art without sin," she began slowly, and looking the Cordelier full in the face the while, "then fling thy stone at us. If not, who gave thee leave to judge? What dost thou, in thy brief hour here, know of the sorrows of St. Agnes? Of its dangers thou knowest somewhat I grant, and knowing them, thou art a brave man to be here at all; but of its sorrows, its bitterness of heart, its mourning, its burden of death and loss, the humbleness of its heart before its God, thou knowest nothing—nothing. Are we sinners above all the sinners in France because this has fallen upon us? Then we were sinners with our altars lit, and in their darkness we have repented. More than that, Monk; our repentance has been accepted. The plague was stayed, and if it come upon us again it will be thy doing, with thy black creed of terror and judgment scaring these poor sheep until they were ready to turn upon the hand that tended them. Thy blame, I say, thy doing, and may God forgive thee, Monk, for it will go hard with me that I should." Round she turned to the mob, now a packed slope of faces that curved in a great bow across the level of the square. "And you, my children, how have we failed you in your hour of trial that you should fail us at the first cry of a stranger? Even a dog has more faithfulness than that. Is it priestliness

that sways you ! What then of the eleven that died for Saint Agnes—noble souls who for your sakes took no account of themselves, and stand this day before the eternal throne, faithful witnesses alike in life and death ? Were they not priests of God ? Aye, by my faith, were they, and nearer to His heart than this black Franciscan with his loveless creed of terror and merciless damnation. Was it his words swayed you ? What ? For a fanatic's outburst could you so soon forget the dark days and darker nights of death and sorrow through which we watched and toiled together, striving with the destroyer, wrestling with him even to the very edge of the grave if so be that we could snatch even one from his hand ? I say it not to boast, but to shame you ; is there a childless mother here we have not comforted, a stricken husband, a widowed wife, a lonely grandsire ? Even when terror snapped the ties of years, and love itself grew fearful, were we afraid ? When the parched throat called and love and kin had fled, who answered ! Who spoke God's peace to the trembling soul and by God's grace brought the blessed life itself to the very closing gates of death ? Who healed the broken-hearted, soothed the sorrowing, shared the grievous burden of the heavy-laden ? Did one mourn and we not also mourn ? Did one suffer and we not share the pain ? Did one die and we not weep ? Oh, my children, my children, have I taken you to my heart to be thrust from you

for the first weaver of windy words that comes your way? I have loved you, I have striven for you; God knows how I have striven. If I have failed to win you, if all I dare love turns from me, then, Monk, have your way, and let there be an end to Denise de Lhoeac."

Slowly the stolid curiosity of the crowd had worn off. Murmurs and sibilant whispers eddied here and there, at first subdued but minute by minute growing in strength and fervour, until at the last the mob swayed to her words as a ripe cornfield sways to the wind; the pinched and careworn faces glooming or brightening as the varying purposes of her words were driven home. At the last there was an instant's pause, a long indrawing of breath, and the beginning of a surging rush for the topmost step.

But the monk was quicker than they. He had stood with arms folded, staring at her from under bent brows, a statue of rebuke, lifeless except for the twitching of the thin lips and the flush deepening to an angry red on the sallow, high-boned cheeks. Now the statue awoke.

"Words, words, words!" he cried, striding forward to the very lip of the uppermost step and flinging out his open hands as if to thrust back the throng. "Now hearken unto me, ye stiffnecked and rebellious, ye who worship the creature rather than the Creator. Whilst ye were blind and silly sheep, having your understanding darkened, and ignorantly following false shepherds, I spared you. Upon them

was my curse, on them alone; and yet not mine, but the curse of Him that sent me to preach the truth. But now that ye are partakers in their wickedness, now that ye call evil good and good evil, now that ye strengthen them in their sin and say, 'So would we have it,' I turn the curse upon you. Hearken ye every one of you. Thus saith the Lord, 'The hearing of this people is made fat, their ears heavy, and their eyes shut; lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and I should heal them. Therefore this plague shall not pass from you until the cities be wasted without inhabitant, and the houses without man, and the land be utterly desolate.' Upon you young men and your maidens, upon your children upon your very babes and sucklings, have ye drawn down——"

Denise heard no more. With every nerve a-tingle with wrath and indignation she was already half-way across the space separating her from the Franciscan, when a hand caught her by the arm, and Roger Patcham's voice whispered excitedly in her ear—

"See, see, see! Did I not say it would come? If that be a type of the rest, then God have mercy on Saint Agnes, for the bigot's prophecy is like to come true. Look; watch Jeanne la Blanche, three steps down in the crowd. I have seen many a one smitten these two months past, but never one like that! Poor soul! poor soul! May God pity her!"

The monk's sudden stride forward had stayed the advance of the human machine, and he was in a fair way to twist the vacillation. Now he chose, when there came such an interruption as cut short even his fiery declamation—a woman's scream, shrill, high-pitched, and tremulous with pain. Nor was it one cry only, but cry on cry as fast as the gasping breath could let loose the sound, and broken only by the hoarse filling of the lungs; piercing, acute, mortal fear and mortal agony in one. For a moment the throng stood, tiptoed and staring; then, as if to avoid a thunderbolt, it split apart, fighting, tearing, struggling in a bestial terror, heedless who suffered in the desperate backward rush if only a yard of space could be set between them and the screaming wretch that staggered foaming in the wedge-like opening. Round she spun, groping and pawing at the air like a shot wolf, round and round, the breath coming harder and harsher with every turn; then, of a sudden, her knees gave way and she fell in a heap upon the steps, moaning.

Flinging off Roger Patcham, Denise laid a shaking hand upon the monk's shoulder.

"Thy doing," she cried, pointing downwards, "thy doing; thou hast smitten the body, and now, if thou art God's servant, heal the spirit if thou canst ere it be too late. She has ten minutes more of this world; ten minutes, Monk, ten minutes and no more. Take me away, Father Roger, for I am sick, sick and weary of my life."

"Come, my lamb, come," and he took her in his arms as a father might a child. "Plague take him for a meddling priest! Did I not say evil would come of all this? Monsieur de Casera, clear a way for us; Mademoiselle is out-worn, and no marvel."

And as Denise turned to leave the terrace she saw the Franciscan, crucifix in hand, stooping over the dying woman, her head resting on his knees, and his mouth, regardless of contagion, bent to within an inch of her ear to whisper such comfort as he might. That he had the courage of two worlds was clear, and at the sight of his eager, earnest face the woman's heart in her half-forgave him.

That day and night Saint Agnes had to fight its battle without aid from its Suzeraine, and it was a battle to the death. Unstrung in nerve, and wearied alike in body and mind, Denise passed the hours in the shade of her tent, an easy prey to a bitter spirit of resentment and unrest. That the world of love was awry she had known. Henri de Lhoac had left her no straight path, and hers was not the nature to be content with crooked ways let their windings be never so smooth and flowery; but that lower love of the people, that love which is part obedience, part loyalty, part trust, which is love and yet not love—that she had thought she held sure and beyond all theft. But now even that was gone, and for all the humming life that was round about her she was conscious of a dreary loneliness, an isolation to

which no love came nor could come, and all that the world held was a sternness of duty and self-sacrifice. A bitter thought that, for let moralists preach the greatness of the high, dry levels of life as they may, and let their maxims be as truthful as they are admirable, duty is cold food for a human soul to feed upon.

But as the day drew to night, and the twilight brought its blessings of coolness to the parched earth, the vigour of life and youth within her asserted itself. Blessed recreative power of youth! Broken hopes are pieced together again, tarnished ideals polished to a fresh refulgence, snapping cords knotted anew, and the piercing, the polishing, the knotting, is viewed as complacently as if there had been neither stain nor snap. Out of the shattered wreckage of the day Denise set herself to build afresh her scheme of life, and in the midst of her building Mother Nature came to her aid, and that night she slept as a child sleeps.

It was a new world into which she stepped next morning, so swiftly had the alchemy of rest wrought upon her wholesome nature—a world not without shadows but with the sun still high in the heavens and a warmth that penetrated even to the shade. The sorrows of Saint Agnes were no less, but her strength was greater, and so the burden to be borne failed to crush as it had crushed in the hour of her depression. Now that she was mistress of herself she had no fear of François de Casera. His secret

she knew, hers he should never know ; and being woman, she could trust herself to hide that which he, being a man, failed to conceal. They are consummate hypocrites at times, these gentle best of women, and can play a part with such fidelity as to deceive even themselves. She had wrestled and overcome and told herself—that which she had thrown she would keep under ; and in her belief she was strong.

De Casera clasped her with a firm clasp of the hand and a frank unconscious smile that quickly passed into a grave concern. "Tell me the worst," she said. "By your eyes I see it has been a *nuit blanche* for Saint Agnes, and yet, in face of the danger, there did I play traitor and desert my post. Oh, Monsieur de Casera I am ashamed."

"It was not you who played traitor, but nature who cried for quarter," he answered, with a poor attempt at lightness. "Not the least of the night's trials has been the fear that the bravest soul of us all had dared overmuch and suffered for her daring. Believe me, Mademoiselle, there is such a thing as too great courage."

"Alas ! that so much good sympathy was thrown away," replied she, the smile struggling back to her eyes an instant and her face flushing. Let her determination be as stern as it might, his solicitude was very sweet. "It was sheer waste, Monsieur, sheer waste. I am ashamed of my weakness, and so the less said of last night the better

except what touches Saint Agnes. What of my people ?”

“You asked the worst, and no words can soften it. Lhocac is the poorer by five, and there remain nineteen smitten.”

“Five dead !” she wailed, wincing back as if from a blow ; “five ? five ? and I sleeping, uncaring. Oh ! my people, my people !”

“Five,” he answered, setting his teeth and holding himself as with a leash lest he play the fool and take her in his arms to comfort her. Little wish had she for his comforting, he thought bitterly, and it would be the act of a rascal to do aught that would add to her troubles while, will-ye nill-ye, they were pent together without hope of freedom. “’Twas the fright killed them. I think the devil was in that monk ; and yet, to be honest, not one of us all, not brave-hearted Father Roger himself, has played the man as the monk did this night past. First he said he must go to that shepherd’s hut that lies out two furlongs into the fields, an empty one-roomed shell. There was a comrade sick, he said, and he must bring him food for the night, a brother Franciscan but not of his own order, and who was too weak to face the pestilence. It was beyond the cordon, but I let him go, he swearing that this other would not quit the hut while the plague raged. For that I gave him an hour, and he took but forty minutes. Then he did the work of ten. His great bony hands are as supple and gentle of touch as a

woman's, and no nursing mother ever took her babe to her arms more tenderly than he the perishing wretches. His very voice grew soft, and from every point he played his part so well that I, who had it in my heart to wring his neck for his mischief-making, have perforce taken to belauding him. A fearless, kindly, unselfish, tender spirit, only I pray God no more of his like come to Saint Agnes."

While he was speaking Denise recovered herself. After all, the tally of loss, long as it was, was no greater than she had looked for. When corn is over-ripe it needs no great strength of wind to shed it, and this storm had been the sudden blast of a hurricane.

"Nineteen? Then there is work for us all. Go you and rest, Monsieur de Casera. The pinch may come again to-night, and then we shall need you, as we have so sorely of late. May God bless you for all your unselfish devotion to my stricken people. That a man should play the man in slaying man seems common and easy enough, and not a thing for much thanks. Too common, God wot, and too easy, but when it comes to saving men, that is mostly left to priests and women. From my heart, Monsieur, I thank you."

To a man in love good resolves are for the most part so much arid stubble; dry, cold, and stiffly upright, let the wind be rough as it may—until the spark falls? So was it now with François de Casera. Gratitude set him ablaze. It was at once

too much and yet not enough. The spark was set flying, and his self-restraint went from him in a whirl of passion.

"Devotion! Thanks!" he cried. "Where is there room for words like these between us two? Or yes, devotion if you will; love, devotion, adoration heart and soul. Because of your coldness, and lest by offence I should ruin all, I strove hard to keep these under, but you have seen them, have you not? Ah! you must have. Love has something of God in it, and cannot be hid. But let me be honest. Your people owe me nothing; but for you I had played coward like any other man, but you drew me and held me here. You are my Saint, my Madonna, my Lady of Succour. Surely the time has come when I may say this? From the first hour I have loved you; have I not waited long enough? Oh, I know I am unworthy, unworthy; but, Denise, can you not absolve and stoop to me? I had no thought of speaking yet, but that bare thanks should pass between us—thanks, and no more—stung me; and surely—surely the time has come when I may speak and be forgiven for speaking. I love you, Denise, love you; can you not say——"

Startled by his outburst, Denise had shrunk back, and as his words came clearly home to her she grew white and fell to trembling as if with fright. Indeed, a kind of fear did possess her—a fear in part of herself and in part of him. To her almost

cloistered quietness of life this vehemence was a revelation, and that it stirred such an answer in herself shamed her, startled her, and lest it carry her away whether she would or no, she broke in upon him, silencing him with an imperious gesture. "The time can never come, never, never! And, oh, Monsieur, what you say is little better than blasphemy; I am but a woman, and weaker than you dream."

"Never?" he echoed, "never? I will take no 'never' from you. Nor is it blasphemy to say you are the sweetest woman on God's earth and the noblest, and yet a saint."

"But it is never," answered she, "There is no other word possible. Understand that, Monsieur."

"What? Has love no claim? Nay, have I no claim even apart from love?"

"Oh, Monsieur, you are not generous to press such a point. No, in such a thing as this I can admit no claim."

"But, Denise——"

"Monsieur, I am Mademoiselle de Lhoeac, and I pray you to remember it."

"Mademoiselle de Lhoeac? Always Mademoiselle de Lhoeac to me? For God's sake, Denise, think what hangs on the answer—communion, love, happiness, the joy and blessing of life. Think, Denise, think!"

"Always, Monsieur, always," and for all her assuredness her voice broke in the saying it.

"Religion—a vow—forbids it should be otherwise. What more can I say? Nay, even that is too much. Oh! you are cruel, you are cruel!"

"Religion!" he echoed bitterly. "Do you call the meddling of a monk religion because of his priest's frock? My ideal strikes higher than that. He has wronged us both. Ah, Denise, Denise, let the wrong be forgotten;" he caught her hands as she held them clasping and unclasping them before her. "Is it for ever? Oh, my love, is it for ever, for ever?"

But his touch braced her slackened nerves, and she drew herself rigidly back.

"It is both never and for ever, Monsieur," she answered, looking him straight in the eyes.

Afterwards one thing came back to her as strange. He had spoken of a priest's meddling, but though the black friar had wrought much evil to Saint Agnes, she could not see how he had wronged them. The blame lay, rather, at the door of Henri de Lhoeac.

THE HOUSE OF HONOUR

I

EVEN if Denise had wished it, de Casera gave her no opportunity for enlightenment. He was still her loyal helper, still her right hand and her forethought; still ready to set his shoulder to the burden that she might be spared its weight, but the frank camaraderie which had so eased the troubles of the first weeks of the pestilence was gone. The union of labour remained, but the communion of sympathy which had made the labour tolerable and even sweet at times was lost.

These were the days of the parching, merciless August heat, and when the spirit walks in a thirsty land the blight within and the blight without tell upon the frame with more than double force. Days they were of glare and dust, of cracked earth and breathless stagnant air, of flagging weariness when not even the quiet of night brought blessing, so dewless was it and so sullenly hot. Through these days of trial to flesh and spirit Denise grew pitifully

wan and worn of face. Only the steady slackening of the anxious strain saved her from prostration, and that the strain slackened as it did was in great measure due to the Franciscan. Two whites cannot make a black better than grey, but if he had done mischief there was this to his credit, that he played a large part in the undoing of it and with no thought of himself.

"A man cannot but admire and yet pity the creature," said Roger on the fourteenth day after the recrudescence of the scourge, and speaking with a kind of compelled and niggard appreciation. "If he sleeps at all it must be on his feet and working the while; or maybe at his prayers, which are gentler, I doubt not, than they were a while back. From his first day he was as lean as a half-filled bran-bag, but now he has so fallen away that his cassock hangs limply on him like a dragoon's coat on a scarecrow. One would swear the fellow is five places at once so busy is he, and day by day his lantern face grows more lantern-like than ever, but in a new sense. There is a light, a glow, in his eyes I do not like. It is as if the soul of the man was edging outwards ready for a flight, and the sight of it gives me the shivers. Life I can stand, death I can stand, but a naked soul 'twixt the one and the other is a terrible thing. I would we had both you and him, Mademoiselle, safe out of Saint Agnes."

"The day for that cannot be far off, Father Roger.

There has been no new outbreak for this week past, and if another seven days go by I think we may call the siege raised."

"So I tell the Franciscan—Father Luke he calls himself—but he only shakes his head with an uncanny smile on those thin chaps of his, and says that sin must first be punished. As if," added Roger passionately, "we had not suffered enough already for Jean Tron's ill-doing!"

"What! I thought he had grown kindlier? Does he still fling that at the poor souls?"

"No, Mademoiselle, no; to them he talks as if the debt was paid and the plague stayed. 'Tis only to me he croaks, and how so vilely honest a man can reconcile the two to his conscience passes my understanding. Father Luke the Cordelier, I suppose, gives Father Luke the Franciscan absolution."

"Then in a week, Father Roger?"

"If, Mademoiselle, if! Remember there is that plaguey 'if.'"

"If the 'if' becomes 'aye' it will break my heart, for," and her voice shook a little in spite of her effort at control, "I have grown coward of late, coward and weary, very weary. Oh! Father Roger, thou canst not think how weary."

"Aye," answered Roger compassionately, his honest lean face growing troubled, "that's plain to be seen without the telling, so plain that even these swine here have seen it and so grow less swinish. Truly, I think there is something like a

soul astir in them. Now that their fears give them leisure to think—if they ever think!—they understand dimly what it is you have done for them. Oh, I see it dawning slowly, slowly, for that's natural. Saving by a miracle, the new spirit is not born to a man in an hour. In the core of winter the day comes at a snail's crawl, and what are they but in winter the whole year round?—in brain and spirit, I mean. But the life is stirring. There are shame-faced mutterings, tags of prayers not for themselves, broken blessings, a flicker of light in the eyes—not much, I grant, but from such clods the little is greater than it seems and means much. Besides, what there is rings true, which is more than can sometimes be said of your fine monsieurs and madames. Three months ago I would as soon have thought to rouse a tree-stump as a dolt peasant, and yet there they are astir with a new life, and of your making. By the week's end—if it be no longer than a week—you will have them slavering where not so long ago they would have bitten."

"Rest in a week!" said Denise, her eyes brightening and a smile stirring the corners of her mouth. "That means——"

"Lhoeac and Madame Catherine." It was characteristic of Roger Patcham that he put Lhoeac first. To him it was as much a personality as the other, and it loomed largest. "I warrant both will give you such a welcome as has not been seen in

Guienne since du Guesclin made his progress a hundred and forty years back, and with reason."

"Nay," said Denise, shaking her head, while the moisture gathered in her eyes, "nay, not Lhoeac except for a farewell. Then to Our Lady's house at Saint Marzier. There is no rest for me at Lhoeac."

"Saint Marzier? Our Lady's house?" Roger Patcham stared bewildered. To set anything, anywhere, for any purpose, before Lhoeac was treason. "Is it the convent of the Poor Clares, Mademoiselle? Oh, you mean for a thanksgiving?"

"I mean for rest, rest. I can thank God anywhere. It is rest I seek, rest for spirit and life. Oh! if you but knew how weary I am in both, and how small and poor the world has grown in these last weeks."

"By my faith, it is bigger than the four walls of a nunnery and richer than any Grey Sisterhood. But I see how it is, Mademoiselle, you are outworn."

"Not in will, my friend, understand that. These weeks have taught me much. Henceforth I shall live for the world to come, in the faith that——"

"Then our love goes for nought? This new life that is come to Saint Agnes may die still-born, and the swine that are groping after manhood go back to their straw and sty? We may perish while you live in the faith that we live! and so comfort your own soul at the cost of a thousand souls! Yourself

first and alone ? By Saint George ! that was never Lhoeac's way, and I'll not believe it."

As he spoke Roger Patcham's face grew stern, sterner than Denise had seen it in all her years of life, and even when he ended his grizzled beard wagged with the hardly checked emotion that moved him. She had outraged not simply his love for herself, but his reverence for Lhoeac, whose hope she was, and so truly he did well to be angry. For the moment not even the sight of her white misery could move him. So for a brief space the two stood silent, bitter-hearted with one another, as love is wont to be when at odds, more bitter than frank indifference : he bolt upright and staring harshly at her from under his bent brows ; she half-turned from him, broken-nerved and biting her lip in her distress and incertitude. In the end it was he who broke the silence, and the coldness which underlay the careful restraint of his harsh voice was so like the ruthless flicking of a bared nerve that she gasped, wincing as at physical pain.

"I crave your pardon, Mademoiselle. I broke in upon you unmannerly. You were saying you will live in the faith that—that——?"

"Old friend, old friend, is this kind ? Is this your twenty years of love ?"

"If twenty years of love have been forgotten, Mademoiselle, if twenty years of love are flung aside at the first whim like a tattered glove, why, so much the worse for twenty years of love, and

small wonder if I, too, forget ; " but the hard voice shook and the lips that lay so tight across the teeth twitched under the bristling grey moustache. Deny love as he might in his temper, it was no easy matter, even in his temper, for Father Roger to be austere to his darling.

" Have I forgotten ? Ah, my God ! no, no, no, never that, never that ! And how can I make you understand ? "

" Well, but—— "

" Let me find peace, Father Roger ; if thou lovest me let me find peace. "

" Peace ? and at Saint Marzier ? With you inside and the work of your life without ? Poor lamb ! hast thou not learned that peace is a bird that never nests from home ? If thou bringest no peace with thee thou wilt find little at Saint Marzier, grey frock or white frock. "

Then a new thought struck him. His face lit up, and reaching forward, he laid his hand lightly on her sleeve.

" Father Roger thou callest me ; that, I know, is a relic of the child's days when scores of times I have nursed you as little more than a tottering babe ; but let the name stand so that I may truly play the father for once and without offence. Tell me, my heart, has Monsieur de Casera aught to say to—— "

" Monsieur de Casera ? " The white face was flushed enough now, and the wail that had shaken

her voice was lost in hardness almost as cold as his own had been ; only a hand flew up to her breast, and he could see the slim fingers playing nervously with the silk kerchief at the throat. "A week hence I hope Monsieur de Casera will ride wheresoever he lists and Lhocac see him no more. Let him go back to the world as he came. I pray you, Father Roger, to leave Monsieur de Casera aside."

"Poor thanks that, Mademoiselle, to a man who, all unasked, has risked his life for our sakes—a mighty proper man too, and a gentleman to boot."

"Aye, all unasked ; there you have it. There need be small thanks for that which was never sought."

"By your leave, that is no answer. Saint Agnes might say the same to you, to me, aye, and to the very monks who died to succour her, martyrs to their religion and humanity and yet martyrs unasked. Who bid them die ? Not Saint Agnes, faith ! Saint Agnes would sooner have slovened it on in her filth ; and yet I have heard you rail and rate because the folks were cloddish and gave so little thanks."

"Thou art right, old friend, quite right, and I quite wrong. But thou seest," and a pitiful smile lit up her troubled face an instant, a smile that was mirthless and fuller of sorrow than laughter, "what sore need this evil spirit of mine has of the sisters' teaching. Do thou thank Monsieur de Casera for me ; thank him as he should be thanked. From a

woman to a man there is the risk that thanks may mean too much or too little. For the rest, we shall wait our week, and—and—thou art not angry with me, Father Roger?"

The hand she held out to him was very cold for all the heavy August heat, and as Roger Patcham took it in both his and kissed it he vowed in his heart that François de Casera should be more than thanked. In his astuteness he guessed there had been some lovers' quarrel, and if plain speech would bring the colour back to Mademoiselle's cheeks, and the light to her eyes, then plain speech there would be, even though an abatement of dignity went with it.

"I angry with thee? The Lord forbid. A man might as well be wrath with his heart's desire. But as thou lovest me, and as thou lovest Lhoeac, let there be no more talk of Saint Marzier. Dost thou want to break all our hearts?"

From Denise he went straight to de Casera, and found him busily doing that which of late he had had little leisure to do, namely, polishing up his beast's cheek-chains, and the steel buckles of its harnessing. These were hanging from a stout peg driven into the trunk of a great oak that grew to the south of the village, and to judge by his extreme diligence Messire de Casera had no thought in the world but to be well rid of so much ill-gotten rust.

"A prophecy without words, Monsieur," said Roger Patcham, with a gesture towards the trappings as the

other turned from his work with a nod. "You smell liberty, and indeed I think it is in the air and not a week away. Do you ride with us to Lhoeac when the time comes to quit Saint Agnes? Surely no man could ever be more welcome."

"Do you say that of yourself, friend Patcham, or on another's behalf? Ah! I see. As I might have guessed, it was friend Patcham's courtesy and no more. When I quit Saint Agnes I ride to Italy, Messire. France is too much cursed with a plague to suit my health."

"But the plague is done with, and for that the largest thanks in the world are due to you."

"Again I ask, do you say that of yourself or for another? Oh! fie! an old soldier should keep his countenance better than that! I mean no offence, but who are you to give me thanks in the name of Lhoeac, Captain Patcham? As to plagues, there are more in the world than one, and not all lightly cured. For the present, then, to me Italy is more wholesome than Guienne;" and back he went to his chain-cleaning.

Father Roger scratched his beard in perplexity as he stood watching de Casera's busy fingers doing their work as deftly as if their owner had served a camp apprenticeship to the sternest martinet that ever swore an oath. The truth was he was sorely puzzled, and it dawned upon him that the handful he had gripped was too big for his fist. A little while back it had seemed an easy thing to cunningly

sound this François de Casera, to grope his secrets as a boy tickling trout under a stone flings his victim gasping on the bank before it even takes fright at danger. So long as it was a mere vague thing to be done, and with the hand of his mistress trembling in his, it had been simple enough. To his mind's forecast it was a thing of course that de Casera would give a direct answer to a few seemingly careless words. But face to face with this six feet of stolid manhood the thing took on another complexion, and the careless words, which were to come so pat and to do so much, failed him utterly. Who was he to fling his mistress at the head of a stranger, and what thanks would either of them give him for the flinging? In the end he did what nineteen out of every twenty men would have done—he gave policy the go-by and went bluntly to the heart of the matter.

"Tell me, Monsieur de Casera, why does Mademoiselle throw herself into the arms of Our Lady of Consolation at Saint Marzier, and all in such a hurry?"

If it had been Roger Patcham's object to compel the other's attention, there was no doubt of his success. De Casera's hand still moved up and down the steels, but his diligence had suddenly gone from him like the tension from a pricked bladder, and from the blankness of his look it was clear he had learned news.

"Saint Marzier?"

"Ay, Saint Marzier ; the nun's house of the Poor Clares."

"That must not be, Master Patcham."

"With all my heart, Messire de Casera ; but no man, save one, dare say ' must ' to Denise de Lhoeac."

"The King ?"

"The King !" and Roger Patcham laughed. "Little we've cared for the King all these years. A fig for the King ; the man she loves, and no other."

The muscles of François de Casera's face stiffened, but, unless a hard stare was an answer, he made no retort. Then Roger Patcham, having gone too far to recede, took his courage in both hands.

"Do you stop her folly, Messire," he said softly. "I think she would heed you."

II

This time de Casera abandoned even the poor pretence of continued work. Chains, buckles, and straps slipped from his fingers, and swung with a clash against the tree-trunk as he turned to Roger Patcham.

"Heed me ?" he cried, doubling his knuckles into his hips, while a little sour smile puckered his mouth. "Bah ! I will be blunt with you, though in a sense it is no affair of yours." And then it was that Master Patcham heard the same truth that Denise

had told him under the blue skies at Meluzza and in much the same words. "You know men, my friend, as a man knows his sword-handle; that is your business. But of women——!" The sour smile broadened to a mirthless laugh, full of a vexed contempt for more than the man he gibed—"of women you do not know even the very beginning. To be frank—for love is like this world's goods and a man who is clean stark beggared has no shame in his beggary. 'Tis only he with a shred of hope that needs must play a part and blind the world, making the little seem the much. Now, I am fair bankrupt, and so can brazen out the truth. I pled with her for an hour, and she would none of me, would not even give me as much as a '*Merci, Monsieur,*' and now you say—— But there, for a shrewd man you talk strange folly at times, Captain Patcham."

"I may not know women," answered Father Roger slowly, "and I take no shame that I don't; a man might as well hope to know what flash will next come from a diamond—red, blue, white, or what you will—as seek to know even one of them out and out, to say nought of knowing them all. But I know this much of one woman at least, that she is troubled to the very bottom of her soul, and that her trouble is new-born. A straight answer, now—nay, I need not say that to you, and I crave your pardon. But tell me, is it because of you, Monsieur de Casera, that Mademoiselle goes to Saint Marzier?"

For a moment François de Casera stood gnawing his lip in his perplexity ; then he answered—

“ On my faith as a gentleman, I fear it is, and yet, on the same faith, I cannot see that it need be.”

“ Am I then such a fool as I seemed ? ” cried Patcham, the beginning of a smile twinkling in his eyes. But there he stopped dead, and a rare scowl chased away the laughter. “ So ? ’Tis your fault ? ” he went on harshly. “ In God’s name, Monsieur, have you dared play fast and loose with Denise de Lhoeac ? But, there, you are no man to be threatened, nor I a man to threaten. We leave that to canaille and bullies. If needs must, we can both act, and say nothing.”

“ Fast and loose ? ” echoed de Casera, with a hard laugh that slipped into a groan before it was clear of his throat ; “ fast bound, and no loosing for me in this world. Man, man, are you so blind that you cannot see that I honour and reverence your mistress as I do my mother’s memory ? and can a man say more ? By my faith ! I trow not, though he protested for a week. Fast and loose, fast and loose ! I play fast and loose with Denise de Lhoeac ? Oh, my friend, God grant you wisdom to mend your folly, for you have sore need of it.”

“ My folly knows this much for truth,” answered Roger Patcham : “ honour and reverence are well enough, but yet a poor exchange for a woman’s love. As well say, ‘ Here is so much snow and ice to warm your fire ! ’ Or, ‘ You’re hungry ; feed, then,

on husks and be happy !' But then, I do not know women."

"Chut !" and de Casera stamped his foot impatiently ; "did I not tell you that she would have none of me ?"

"Not upon these terms ; what woman would ? Honour, reverence, are these enough ? Was there no love with them ? My faith, but you are cold, Monsieur, you are cold."

"Cold ? I cold ? What does a withered stock like you know of a man's love ? I pled, prayed, urged, stripped my very heart bare before her, abased myself as I never yet have done saving to Almighty God ; and yet you fling my coldness in my face because, being a man, I cannot lightly tell a man such things, but wrap them round with reverent, careful words. Love ? Trust me, Denise de Lhoeac knows I love her as a woman loves to be loved."

"And she ? What answer, Monsieur—— ?"

"Answer ?" cried de Casera bitterly ; "no answer pleasant to remember. She shrunk and trembled as if I preached sacrilege ; thrust me back with hands that never touched me, so abhorrent were they. Not that I sought to importune her ; their trembling was enough. 'A vow,' she said, 'comes between us——'"

"A vow ?" cried Father Roger, breaking in. "What vow ?"

"Why, how should I know ?" answered de Casera,

cooling suddenly and laying, as it were, a fresh hold upon himself. "She talked of the church, stammered and shrunk still further back. And I—well, to be frank, my temper was worn to a thin edge, and I cursed the church—since what has the church to do with the love of a man for a maid?—and with that we parted. There's the blunt truth," added he, with rueful scorn; "and yet you say I can keep her out of Saint Marzier if I will."

For a moment the two stood silent, each coursing his own thought and finding the sport cold comfort. At last de Casera went on, dropping his words slowly and speaking to himself rather than to the other: "Why, yes, yes, so perhaps I may before all's done, but that could only be the last card in the game, for though it may gain the trick, it wins hate and not love." Then he again fell silent, and stood gnawing his lip, a veritable pillar of dejection. Indeed, so wrapped in his thought was he that he gave no more than a dull heed to Roger Patcham's sudden illumination as he brought his closed hand down with a clash upon his stretched palm, and cried—

"A vow? Aye, aye; I see it now: some self-devotion for the salvation of Saint Agnes from its strait. 'Save these sheep, oh Lord, and do as thou wilt with me.' Aye, that would be like her, for with her it has ever been her folk first and herself last. Much thanks her folk gave her, and now the vow pinches; for d'ye see, Messire, you have come

between her and her conscience. Oh, yes, faith, the thing is clear enough, and for such vows I would not give a fig when once her nerve is back; they are the vows of a sick heart and not of a sound mind. What? Am I not right?"

But de Casera was not so easily comforted.

"No," said he sourly, "thou art not right; thou art as far from it as to-day from last week, and with many a soul that's the difference of life and death."

"Wait," answered Roger, still jubilant, "wait, and before our seven days are up you will see that my folly has its salting of wit. Father Roger is a fool, and knows nothing! Wait, Messire; wait, I say."

Yet Roger Patcham's optimism was sorely tried as the days crept on. The brooding fear of a renewed outbreak, and the claims upon flesh and spirit, alike slackened almost hourly, but the lighter labour brought no comfort in its ease. Rather it widened the cleavage between these two. There was less association, less of the sympathy of a joint task, and as the burden of toil and danger lifted the two fell further apart. Nor was Saint Agnes much happier. The first wildfire news of its coming freedom had been followed by a half-maddened relapse into the brute, the forerunner of a drunken debauch that would have plunged Lhoeac back into its terrors had not Roger Patcham, backed by the powers of the church in Father Luke, sternly repressed the insanity. That night his men kept such watch as they would have kept had Spain been on

the move, and with more need. But the watch was effectual. Sorely against its will, Saint Agnes went to its straw sober, and awoke to the new day chastened and in its right mind.

That had been the day of Roger Patcham's unsuccessful effort in diplomacy, and with it came a consciousness that the gain of the coming freedom would be matched by a loss that Saint Agnes laid bitterly to its soul. Denise, half-unknown to them, had grown deep into their sluggish love, and the dull hearts of the peasant folk felt the shadows of a coming bereavement. As the half-witted child is slow to weep, slow to laugh, slow to love, slow to hate, but keen to hold fast that which at last its dim sense understands, so Saint Agnes, stolid, callous, resentful, uncomprehending, had in these later days felt its stubborn spirit stir within it. Something of the lavished love, something of the sacrifice, something of the abnegation became clear, and though she knew it not, there grew up to the mistress of Lhoeac a devotion that was as blind in its wholeheartedness as had been the hate, coldness, and distrust, a devotion that bound her people to her by bonds which were not those of vassal and Suzeraine.

That she went her way amongst them undreaming of this was no marvel. They were unemotional, these folk, too hard-pressed in the sharp struggle for bare life to stop to consider principles or passions. When, with all their labour, the belly was but two-

thirds filled, there was scant time to think of heart or spirit. Death, pain, and poverty were their daily brethren, and even of these they took little thought; they were too common. It followed, therefore, that it was hard for a new thought to take root in such stony soil, but it equally followed that once rooted it would bide rooted until the trump of the last angel sounded. It is the heritage of the peasant that a virtue can hold him as securely as can a vice. To Denise, then, the days were as they had ever been, dull and thankless; nor, but for a chance meeting with Father Luke when probation had still four days to run, would she have guessed, even dimly, of the new life that had come to Saint Agnes.

Crossing the highway that cut the town in halves, she saw in the shade, hard by the broad scar left by the burning of Jean Tron's hut, a huddled and hunched figure sitting, legs doubled underneath, elbows on knees, and a cowed head sunk wearily forward. The rusty black of the soiled and patched cassock—it had seen as rough wear as its owner these last weeks—left no doubt as to who crouched there in so forlorn a fashion, for in all Saint Agnes there was but one Franciscan frock. For a moment she paused, thinking the man asleep; taking, as it were, a dog's rest between tasks—the only rest he had allowed himself since his folly had wrought such sore evil; but presently he stirred, twisting his meagre shoulders under the slack of his gown as if in pain, and groaning dismally.

"Father Luke?" she cried sharply, but still irresolute, for while it moved pity, the figure in its filth and threadbare sordidness repelled her; "Father Luke?"

The groaning ceased, the uneasy heave of the body was stayed, and out of the depths of his hood the monk looked at her over his crossed wrists. From the dullness of his peering eyes it was plain he did not recognise her for all the flooded brightness of the sun, but as she moved forward knowledge dawned upon him, and of a sudden he woke to life.

"Keep back," he cried, stretching out a lean hand eagerly. "For the love of Mary, keep back! Would you put fresh sin on my soul, and the judgment so near? The Lord only knows if it is not past cleansing already."

Slowly, and like a man crippled with pain, he stumbled to his feet, the lean hand still thrust out, bony and sinister as the finger-post of death.

"Sin?" said she, never halting now that the sight of his gaunt face had given pity the upper hand. "Why, how could that be? How could I——" Then she paused, and flushing suddenly shrunk back.

"Never that," answered the monk, with swift comprehension of her thought. "Mortal sin," and he groaned anew, "mortal sin; but the Lord be thanked, never that. The death of the folk lies heavy on me. My doing! ah, my God, my doing!

Murder, body and soul: for some were sorely unready, and some died unconfessed. My doing How shall I answer God Almighty? Nay, stand back, stand back, for I would not have another—

He checked himself suddenly, as if his tongue ran ahead of his will, and for a moment the two stood silent with half the blinding white of the roadway between them.

"The death of the folk was the will of God," began Denise slowly, but got no further, for he broke in sharply—

"The death of the folk came of man's pride. Let there be no mistake about that, *M. demoiselle*. The horror of it has cursed me all these days, for who knows the terrors of the pit as I do? You heard me by the church door that day? God knows I thought myself His messenger; God knows that though I lied to the truth I gave my soul no lie. What I said I held by. If my light was darkness, God knows I thought my darkness light, and so preached it. Was I wrong? All men do not find heaven by the same road. Then came—— But you know the rest, and oh, my God! have I not toiled, have I not prayed, have I not repented? and all through the toil, all through the bitterness of repentance and the still greater bitterness of self-reproach, the heavy hand of the Lord was upon me and I knew that sin must be wiped out in sacrifice. Is it not His law?"

He had spoken slowly, as a man tormented by

some gnawing, grinding agony picks his words and mouths them carefully lest the torment cripple his coherence. Twice he had staggered, groping at the air for support; and thrice had gripped the bosom of his frock with both hands, shrinking and writhing as if in pitiless distress.

"Surely," said Denise as the monotonous voice ceased dropping its quiet words, "surely repentance brings forgiveness. Is that not also His law?"

"Ah! God!" he cried, with a rising shrillness in his harsh voice, "will that give heaven to those who died in sin? and if by my fault they be shut out, where is there peace for me? Can a man forget these things simply because he dies? It is for that I am here. Through these days I have watched you, through these days my humbled soul has halted after yours as even in their thick darkness blind eyes feel the light and turn to it. Pray thou for me that my sin may be forgiven, pray thou that those who died in sin because of me may be assoilzied."

He had swayed to his knees, possibly unconsciously, and now, with clasped hands raised level with his chin, rocked himself to and fro as if in an agony before the altar.

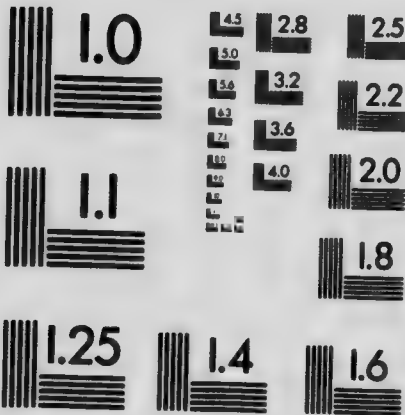
"I pray? I? Father, in this you mock more than me."

"No mockery. Ah! no, no; prayers are like God's sunbeams, and every one brings blessing howsoever thankless the clod may be; therefore, Mademoiselle, I beseech you pray for me night and



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day that the punishment may fall in this world only."

"I will pray," answered she softly, "and not alone, but the good sisters of Saint Marzier with me. As you have given your life to God's service, so will I."

Again stumbling to his feet, he stood staring at her. His cowl had been shaken back upon his shoulders, and in the brightness of the sunshine his pinched face showed the angles of the bones in the knots and ribs through the hard-drawn sallow skin. The fire which lit his eyes the day he had harangued the mob had smouldered down, ashed over as it were by weariness and agony of mind, but now it leaped into a sudden flame, and the gaunt face grew almost life-like in its new interest.

"Give not as I gave," he cried vehemently. "Words, words, words, so much empty wind; no more. I know now that that way lies the soul's starvation. In the Lord's name I charge you, give no more works. Saint Marzier? What have you to do with Saint Marzier? Let the houseless and the homeless and the hopeless fill Saint Marzier. For you God's house is here, here where we stand. What? You have nursed a soul into the beast and would leave it to go back to the beast? Then would your sin be worse than mine, and mine—ah! my God," and his weak, hoarse voice broke into a wail, "mine is the groping in eternal darkness. The faith I held has gone from me, and in its place is the judgment that

I preached. Hold to your folk's love, Denise de Lhoeac, and out of love build men, and men's salvation. Let love and labour be your prayer."

"Love?" answered Denise bitterly, letting his fervency go by her for the time. "Their love! What hold have I upon their love? They do not want me. See how they turned from me at the first beck."

"Aye, but they turned back."

"To turn away again for the next comer! Weathercocks to every wind. No, they have no need of me."

"Yes, the greater need," and in his earnestness Friar Luke forgot his own injunction and strode forward, only to reel back, staggering, and with both hands gripping afresh at his breast. "It is the judgment of God; keep back, keep back from me," he groaned as Denise, with instinctive pity, followed him.

"But you are ill, suffering; let me——"

But Friar Luke had recovered himself. "That counts for nought. I would thank God if there was nothing worse behind it: let it pass. As for your people, listen, *Mademoiselle*: they are but children, and who can dare to say that a child has no love because its ignorant petulance cries out against its nurse? And—and—but who am I that I should preach to you?—I, who have learnt so much and have still such need to be taught! Still, remember there is always this truth, the nobility of life lies in

doing the right for the right's sake, let the people want, or not want, what they may. Saint Marzier? Nay, not Saint Marzier, but Saint Agnes, say I."

Then, as she watched him, troubled rather that three such widely different men should all so patly hold the one opinion, his face grew ghostly in its pain and pallor, and without even a gesture of farewell he turned and ran until he disappeared behind the line of houses—ran blindly and in short zigzags, as a deer does that has received its death-hurt but still struggles on, seeking some solitude where it may lie down and die in quiet.

That was the last Saint Agnes knew of the Franciscan friar and also the final scene of all that long companionship of life and death that stuck in Denise's memory, save only the riding home to Lhoac which came three days later. Of all who had borne men's parts in common with him, who had struggled, endured, suffered, despaired, conquered, Roger Patcham alone was to meet him face to face in this world. May it be that at the last his soul had something of that peace he could not give it in the days of his strength, and that the burden which so sorely oppressed him was uplifted. Why not? For his sin he gave repentance, for his fault amendment, for the need of others unstinted service and self-sacrifice without fee or reward, and what can man do more? The rest is God's. From that hour he was missed from Saint Agnes. As he came unasked so he went unsped, nor, in its divided heart

of joy at being quit of its plague and sorrow at losing its mistress, did Saint Agnes give him a second thought. To his lot fell the common thanks of the world. His work for good or evil was alike forgotten with the passing of four-and-twenty hours.

When at last the day came when, out of their joint wisdom, Roger Patcham and François de Casera pronounced the plague stayed, Denise, had she had her way, would have mounted her horse and ridden home to Lhoeac as if she had been no more than out for an hour's hawking. But Captain Roger, with his own objects in view, would hear of no such commonplace departure.

"By your leave, Mademoiselle," said he, "we shall go out as victors, as becomes us, and not sneak home like shamed curs. That is, we shall go as it were with drums beating and colours flying, lest the fools and venomous of this world say we left in secret with our work half-done."

The beat of drums, or the parade which stood for it, was the very thing Denise sought to avoid; but Roger Patcham's latter reason touched her. It was well that Lhoeac should know, and the world beyond Lhoeac, that the embargo was lifted and that, save for stricken homes and sore hearts, which were for time's curing, all was as it had been before Jean Tron's home-coming, and of these neither Lhoeac nor the outer world would care a fig. She gave way, therefore, and took her place in the pro-

cession without remonstrance. Besides, it was Father Roger's whim, and to Father Roger she owed much more than love.

Nor was Captain Patcham minded to botch his trivial pageant. Not Saint Denis of France himself could have better used the available scant material, and as they swept round by the lower end of the village, to curve back again into its roadway, Denise smiled to herself to think that so stern and practical a man could be drawn to such childish display. But as they came in view of the central square the smile died away, her eyes kindled, and her heart leaped within her as she had never thought to feel leap again.

All Saint Agnes was gathered there even as it had been gathered at the coming of the Black Friar, but with a difference. This time a narrow pathway cleft the crowd asunder, and for three ranks deep on either side all knelt, save where the aged priest of Saint Agnes stood in the forefront, his acolytes by him; nor, from end to end was there a covered head—all were unbonneted as if in a Easter reverence before the altar. All, too, were silent. For that one moment the only sound was the ring of the horses' shoes on the rounded stones as the single file of riders passed slowly onwards. In this also it was like the act of worship, so like that sense of profanation struck Denise, and as she drew near the place where the priest stood amidst his flock she halted full of stern rebuke. But in his fif-

years' service of God, Father Marcel had grown wise in men and divined her thought.

"Not to you," he said, his voice tremulous with more than age, "but to the Lord God who out of His mercies gave you to us in our need. To Him be glory, praise, and honour. But what can we say to you, daughter? Our poverty can add nothing to your riches, our weakness nothing to your strength; but if riches fled to-night and strength decayed, believe this: neither time nor loss could take our love and gratitude from you. May the blessing of the poor and sore at heart rest upon you, Denise de Lhoeac, blessing and honour from those who have nought else to give; and may God's mercies be as ever present in your need as yours were in ours. To His blessing, His comfort, and His keeping I commit you, now and henceforward to the ages of the ages. Amen."

And all the people echoed, "Amen, and amen."

Not at first did the meaning of all come home to the weary, white-faced woman who, frail and worn, was so sorrowfully unlike the Denise of the early summer, but as the sense of it grew into her mind her eyes brightened, then grew dim, and before Fra Marcel had ended the tears were running down her cheeks, nor had she so much as a thought to dry them.

"Is it true, my children, is it true?" she began between her sobs; "and yet, what have I done? It was not I; it was——"

"It was God's angel," broke in a man's harsh voice from the packed corner of the square. "It was Saint Denise of Lhoeac—no less. Who is there Saint Agnes of ours? And what has she done for us in our need? Nought, nought. Let there be no more a Saint Agnes, but let it be Saint Denise. Her we know, and her we can trust. God bless and keep Saint Denise of Lhoeac."

And again all the people answered, "Amen."

That ended the scene. Silently, and with streaming cheeks, Denise rode up the narrow lane-way, her chin sunk upon her breast and her wistful eyes blind to the kindly, weeping faces that turned their gaze to follow her on her way. Not even the voices of benediction and farewell reached her. For the moment the exterior world was blotted out, and she lived apart with this new-found revelation. Into her poverty of life there had come riches, and the magnitude dazed her. Jacopo Ravelli's forecast had come true, and if the House of Honour was not crowned as the old Seigneur may have dreamed, crowned it was none the less.

Once clear of the village, and heading towards the Rocks of the Bears, Roger Patcham roused her.

"They mean well, the folk," said he, riding noisily up to her side and speaking with hard bluntness. "For the moment, too, they seem in earnest. No doubt they may remember for a year, or, say, until the next mildew. There is nought like a mildew to stir a fool peasant."

Round upon him turned Denise, a hot spot burning on each cheek.

"Shame, Captain Patcham, shame on your sneering tongue! Not even you shall so belittle my folk."

"What, Mademoiselle? Did they seem to you in earnest?"

"Aye, and I thank God for it. I never dreamed they loved me so."

"But once you are in Saint Marzier, Mademoiselle, I fear——"

"Oh!" and the cheeks that had grown white again flushed anew, but not this time in anger; "I pray of you, Father Roger, let there be no more talk of Saint Marzier."

Too old a soldier to triumph in his victory, Captain Patcham reined back to de Casera's bridle hand.

"She has changed her mind in one thing, Messire," said he, with a chuckle, "and so may well change it in another. All this is very pretty, but I know these cattle, and a time will come when Lhoeac will need a man's hand. For all its soft heart of day, a peasant's memory is no longer than the rest of the world's. You said a while back that the air of Guienne was unwholesome. Since you will not ride to the Castle, take an old fool's advice and try the air of Meluzza. I'll warrant that Carlo Perego and young Madame Catherine will vouch that it is the finest air in the world for such a plague

as yours. It cured them for life, and inside of a month. Thank the saints, there is no more thought of Saint Marzier."

Nor, in any case could there have been at that time. For, once within her own familiar walls, nature gave way, and the vintage was over before Denise could so much as bear the sweet freshness of the late autumn sunshine. Then, because first it was Roger Patcham's whim, because secondly Madame Catherine had a grandson to spoil, and thirdly it was sound sense, they moved south again but so slowly that it was mid-December before they reached Meluzza.

THE HOUSE OF FRIENDS AND
ENEMIES

I

BUT first Captain Patcham had his own private curiosity to gratify, and being a man of prompt action, he lost no time in its indulgence. A score of times while shut up in Saint Agnes he had troubled his mind as to what took the Franciscans so often to the hind's hut beyond the cordon. A brother friar, sick and in terror for his life, was the tale, and a tale probable enough. There are some men to whom not even the frock gives courage. But the veriest coward must surely show himself at times, and never once had Roger Patcham seen so much as the flutter of a second cassock. This uninvited brother of Saint Francis lay close as a hare, and the closer he lay the keener grew Captain Patcham's curiosity.

Probe the mystery from Saint Agnes he would not and for several reasons, any one of which was of itself sufficient. The hut was beyond the cordon,

and therefore out of bounds, nor did it consort with the dignity of Lhoeac that he, its chief captain, should spy on a wandering friar. But once the embargo was lifted, and Denise delivered over to Madame Catherine's anxious and tender keeping, Roger easily persuaded himself that it was his plain duty to ascertain the whereabouts of Father Luke, if only to give him thanks for his unsparing devotion.

Service is like alms, and a duty, to be well done, should be done promptly, so the forenoon of the day after his return to the Château found Roger Patcham riding slowly down the slope in the too familiar direction of Saint Agnes. But while still short of the village he drew to the right, skirted round it, and so approached the hut from the further side. It was little better than a summer booth. The overlapping planks that formed the walls were of the roughest, knotted and warped. A narrow slit in the side opposite the crazy, ill-hung door had served as a window until the gap had been stopped by thrusting into the space a ragged, twisted sack. Upon the roof, to dull the fierceness of the sun's heat, was a foot's thickness of parched earth. Altogether it was a wretched hovel, and not even the swine of Lhoeac were as ill-housed.

Tying his beast to a hook driven into the wall, Roger Patcham drew down the hanging latch, and pushed at the door without the ceremony of knocking, but it was fastened inside.

"Open, within there!" he cried, shaking the door.

impatiently, for the check annoyed him. He was not accustomed to shot bolts within the four corners of the Suzerainty. "It is I, Father Luke: Captain Patcham; open, man, open!"

Then with head aside he stood listening, but there was neither answer nor stir of life.

"Plague take the monk," he muttered, talking to himself as a man will when worried, and with no heed to the sinister appositeness of the ejaculation. "If he be within, why not answer? and if he has quitted the place, then how upon earth is the door bolted on the inside? It smells of Sathanas. Open, you fools, open, and quickly!"

But the second call was as barren as the first. He must bide without or find his own way of entrance. Never the first. Losing the little patience he had left, Roger Patcham lifted a heavy stone and flung it against the frail barrier, splitting it into two leaves, which swung inwards with a crash. The sharp contrast between the clear sunshine and the blackness of the interior for a moment blinded him; then swiftly the inner walls grew to shape and substance.

The within was as wretched as the without, but if the hut contained little, that little was enough, and more than he looked to find. Halting midway across the threshold, Roger Patcham stood and stared. There, near the right-hand further angle, propped upon the floor, was a rude cross; no crucifix, not even planed wood, nothing but a

rough upright, as rough as it came from the woodman's axe, and with as rough a transverse piece bound across it by a strand of willow-bark. At its foot was a confused mass of rusty clothing that in its dingy blackness blent itself, and merged into the dusk of the hovel, but as Patcham's sight cleared the confusion took form. It was Friar Luke upon his knees, his bent head and shoulder fallen against the wall, and one lean hand flung back towards the middle of the floor. But there was no need of the arm's uncouth twist to make known the truth, for every helpless, pathetic curve in the sunken body told its tale.

"Dead!" said Patcham, startled into speech, and his nerve shaken by the suddenness of the thing. Then, baring his head, involuntarily he stepped forward on tiptoe and laid his head on the monk's shoulder. "The plague! By all the saints, the plague!" he cried, starting back; "now I know why he fled the place in secret and without a farewell. May God have mercy on him for a martyr. He came to die here in his loneliness lest the folk yonder should—Aye, but what of his fellow? Has the coward left him to die untended in this kennel like a dog?"

Straightening himself, Roger Patcham looked round the mean hut. Filthy, squalid, sordid, the blackness of its solitude must have made it a terrifying and a sorrowful death-chamber. Remote from the voice and touch of his kind the Franciscan in

the last and awful abnegation of repentance had given himself to God upon his knees, unafraid for all his sense of sin. Ah ! there was a man ! To die in a crowd, in the heat and struggle of battle, full in the approving eye of the world, striking blow for blow for life and staking your skill and strength against another's, is, to many a man, to most men, Roger Patcham told himself, not so hard. The emulation, the passion in the blood, a man's faith in his own star, all make for daring and courage. But to be stricken with a mortal and loathsome sickness and efface one's self ; to walk solitary into the gathered shadows of the dark valley ; to face God alone, un comforted by human thought or care, and all for the blessing and safeguarding of another who knows nothing of the sacrifice, is the labour of a hero ten times told.

Alone ? Stay, what was that yonder ? Roger Patcham was surely unstrung that day, for of a sudden he started and drew back a step, groping behind him till his fingers touched the rude and splintered roughness of the lapped boards. Along the opposite wall of the cabin and three feet from its floor a shelf-like bed was fixed, coffin-shaped, and no more than a couple of narrow planks with one broader plank turned edge up to form the side. In the shadow cast by the broken door it had remained hidden until now, but a blur in the darkness had grown from grey to dull parchment-yellow, and all at once Patcham was aware of two eyes

watching him fixedly across the ledge—eyes that never shifted their unwinking stare ; an evil face thin for all its breadth of bone, and with the one cheek that was visible covered by a five days' bristles stiff, grizzled, and thick-set.

"Hulloa ! Master Monk ; so you are there ? and playing fox after the manner of your kind. Shame upon you to leave the man who tended you in your sickness to die in a corner while you lay there at your ease ! What ? You are sullen, are you ?" he went on, as the steadfast gaze neither shrunk nor wavered. "By the faith of Roger Patcham, if thou wilt not rouse for the sake of the dead thou wilt for the strength of the living ! Out of that thou shalt come, my friend, though a cardinal's scarlet cover thee you in place of a beggarly—— Saints ! who art you, man ? Where have I seen—— My God ! it is Monseigneur himself, and—and—as cold clay as the other."

"You see," he said to Madame Catherine when having shifted his tainted clothes and thrust them well into the heart of a roaring fire, he unfolded the news ; "the poor monk served us better than he knew. God forbid that I should wrong the dead, but if Henri de Lhoeac was not in that hurry for an evil end why was he there at all ? To bring us his blessing and his prayers ? He could have prayed and blessed from Bordeaux to as good purpose. No, little of praying and blessing, saving as they say, the devil does both, backwards, so

what I ask myself is this : had Saint-Seurin and Libourne failed to fill his purse as fast as he emptied it, and had he turned anew to Lhoeac, using that honest, crack-brained stray enthusiast to work his ends ? A shrewd man was Monseigneur, and no one could better light a fire to warm himself without setting his own hand to the torch. I grant you that of the closed chapel he knew nothing, but he knew the stuff the people were made of, and how, in the time of their terror, religion runs mad, and so they might be swayed by just such a one as Friar Luke. D'you think, now, it was he suggested the wrath of God that so filled the poor monk ? Well, the curse went home to roost, for the man died of the plague, and died alone, fearful of his end and staring at that pitiful rubble of humanity in the corner. I could wish him no worse."

"Poor soul ! poor soul ! Alone, and at such a time."

"Poor soul ? What was the poor soul doing there ? Tell me ? If he came for good, why not have come to the Château ? I think you women would pity the very devil if he were but sick enough."

"And—and—what next, Captain Patcham ? Remember that after all he was a Lhoeac."

"Never fear but he shall have a noble funeral," answered Roger, rising as he spoke, for he had no mind to be further questioned. "But of him and of Father Luke say nothing, lest the folk take fright

and lose heart afresh. A Lhoeac? Yes, but Mademoiselle Denise has one bitter foe the less, and as I said at the first the monk served us better than he knew."

But of Captain Patcham's discovery in the shepherd's cabin, and of the going up of that cabin in fire the same night, to the great bewilderment of Saint Agnes, Denise knew nothing until the visit to Meluzza had come and gone. And then, though awed and struck with womanly pity at the miserable end of the man who was the last Lhoeac in direct descent, too much of gladness had come into her life to leave room for sorrow. Nor, by reason of this same gladness, could she withhold forgiveness from Henri de Lhoeac, much as he had sinned against her. Present blessing wipes out past pain, and the evil he had wrought for his selfish ends was forgotten in the good he at the same time so unwittingly and unexpectedly worked out.

Had Madame Catherine had her way the story would have been fully told the first day the shadow of death passed from the face of Denise. A timorous woman, the secret weighed upon her, for while it was reasonable that the end of Father Lake—one amongst thousands—should be lost in indifference, it seemed little less than sacrilege that the fate of such a noble churchman as his Eminence should remain hidden. But Roger Patcham would none of it.

"No, no, no; Mademoiselle is more to us than

the whole College of Cardinals, living or dead. She has had fret enough in her life of late, and from all that went on in Bordeaux she will take Monseigneur's death hard, though, for that matter, what passed in Bordeaux was a bigger handful than I could grasp. Wait, Madame, till she has Caterina for comfort, and the prattle of the little one about her. Love and a child will cure a sore heart sooner than aught else in the world."

But even in Meluzza the telling was put off from day to day, until presently the shadow of Made-moiselle's living kindred loomed larger and nearer than that of the dead.

II

Some men while young are like certain vintages, rough, coarse, heady, difficult; they only mellow and grow fit for men's using after many years; but let them ripen, let them translate exuberance to power, and they are the very strength and glory of their times. Such was not Luigi di Gadola. The lees of his hot and evil youth stirred in him even in his middle age, and all the mellowness the years had brought was that of selfish, cruel cunning and a wider appetite for whatsoever pleased him.

If not a great man, he had at least one strong attribute of greatness: he could bide his time. When, therefore, his attempt upon Meluzza failed, as has been told, he merely cursed more heartily

than was his wont, and hung the project up until a more convenient season.

The coming of his opportunity had been put off a little longer than he had reckoned, but by neither fault nor neglect of his. Calmly certain that sooner or later the pear would drop into his hand, he could afford to turn his thoughts abroad for that aggrandisement denied him for the moment at home. Besides, the stable government of Cæsar Borgia in the Romagna had its effect even in Northern Italy, so that for a very brief space it became the fashion to look askance at violence when the crime was not in the direct interest of a sovereign prince.

When it can be enforced it is a wise rule that that which creates a wrong should remedy the wrong, and Luigi di Gadola being thus injured by this fatherly government, determined that Cæsar Borgia should repay his loss. To him, therefore, he attached himself, prospering with him until the day that Julius the Second arose and Cæsar's dream of a united Italy swayed by a long line of Borgias went the way of all dreams; but being an astute man, Luigi di Gadola escaped his patron's ruin, tolerably well content to have lost no more in the end than he had gained in the beginning. Then came his leisure to think once more of Meluzza, and with his leisure came his tools and his opportunity.

The one he found ready to his hand, the other, like a diligent and watchful man, he made for him-

self out of the material chance provided. Indeed, tools there were in plenty, for masterless men, plundering reivers, rogues in grain stripped of all virtues save the one of courage, were never more rife than in that winter which found Denise at Meluzza for the second time. Be sure that with Carlo Perego in his mind Messire di Gadola made no second mistake in his choice of chief rascal. Not even his own disappointment at the former failure rankled as did the knowledge that the man he had raised from the gutters of Turin lorded it in the house he had been hired to win for his patron. It says much for di Gadola's self-restraint that he had given Master Perego such long license, but then the Seigneur of Casa Foscotti was in many respects quite a superior scoundrel, and, after all, the man who can hang up his hate in his private closet until it suits him best to wear it is the man to be truly dreaded. But a second Carlo Perego! No, no, with Tito Zucchi he would run no risks of failure from unimagined scruples.

Doubtless something of the sort was in his mind as, in the same room and over the same table where he had made Carlo Perego feel the purchasing power of forty crowns a month, he mapped out the coming campaign to the newest military governor—a campaign this time of sheer violence and brute strength. But if : Tito Zucchi he had a surer man to deal with, he had also one whose wit was as shrewd as his own.

"This is very well, Messire," answered he, b shaking his head at the same time. "The schen is as clear as daylight. 'Rake out the chestnuts from the fire,' said the monkey to the cat—no offence, yo understand—'and we'll go shares.' If the heart were cold the plan would work to admiration but——" and he ended with another shake of h close-cropped head that was as eloquent as th rhetoric of the whole Three Estates.

"Ah! ah! a coward!" said di Gadola, knowing very well that he lied, but not scrupling to gain his end by a lie; "and where, may I ask, have yo found hot chestnuts to be had without the riskin of scorched paws? They never came my way a Casa Foscotti."

It was characteristic of Tito Zucchi that he passe by the imputation unanswered. He was no man to cry out before he was hurt, and such a pin-prick scored his hide not at all. He knew well it was but a move in the game, a feint as it were, and not a well meant thrust that called for a wary parry and a sharp return. If the patron believed what he said he would not have had him at Casa Foscotti, nor delayed the saying till then.

"Scorched paws are my trade, Signor, and the hotter the fire the larger my share of chestnuts. That is my rule and a thing of course. Let it blaze an' welcome say I. But this is no petty stab in the dark. What if the cat rakes out the chestnuts and sets the house in a roar with the scattering of the

embers? He might be burnt hide and claws and the monkey no whit the worse."

"Tut, man, be plain, and leave fables to children."

"I desire nothing better, Signor. Suppose, now, this raid well over. What if Messire Perego and Mademoiselle de Lhoeac have friends strong enough to move the Pope, or even Sforza."

"They have none, so that is settled."

"Oh! by your leave, Signor, that is easier said than known, and it is hard for a man to be wise after he is hung."

"Well, suppose you are right—though you are wrong—what then?"

"According to your plan, Signor, you play generalissimo, and direct the campaign from Casa Foscotti while we see the thing through at Meluzza. If it were a small affair I would ask nothing better, but this may make a noise."

"Come to the point, man, bluntly."

"Bluntly then, Signor, you must lead in person, or at least seem to do so. Then if the Pope moves, or Sforza, he cannot in common justice touch poor Tito Zucchi until he has dealt with the Seigneur of Casa Foscotti, whereby, for the sake of the noble Seigneur poor Tito may come off with a whole skin. The point lies there."

"But, fool, whether I be here or there I will be as deep in it as thou. The hand that holds the dagger gets the blame whether blood trickles across the

knuckles or no. Two leaders may botch it. Let it be as we planned."

"As you planned, Signor, not we, and I do not ride alone. Trust me, there will be no botching."

"But why, man, why? I have my reasons for not showing in this thing."

"I do not doubt you have, Signor, and good reasons," answered the other, with grim irony, "but to be blunt as you bade me, it is by reason of the reasons I am afraid. The hand may bear the blame, but what of the tongue or the brain behind the hand? May not the one say, 'That was not by my command'? and the other, 'That was no thought of mine'? Plainly, supposing the Pope moves—and Julius has the longest arm that has stretched from St. Peter's chair this many a day—what is to prevent Messire di Gadola from disavowing Tito Zucchi? Nay, in his zeal for justice and anger at his sore loss, Messire di Gadola might even avenge his dear kinswoman on poor Tito Zucchi! No offence, Signor, no offence, but I, too, have learned policy under Cæsar Borgia. A charming mannered man was the King of Romagna—courtesy itself, affable and condescending; but if a tool were like to cut his fingers then God have mercy on the tool, let it have done its master what service it might."

It is to di Gadola's credit that he contested the point no further, nor, in his turn, did he repel the allegation. It was a thrust in reply to his feint

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with this difference, that there was a purpose behind it.

"The plan is settled, then, and I go in command. But it seems to me you too early assume success. This Perego is neither fool nor coward—by the Saints ! no ! the man who plays me false and scores is neither one nor the other—and now he has this grizzled English pick-purse to back him. Never trust an Englishman when he calls himself honest. 'Tis the devil turned sick and the more dangerous. But that's by the way."

"The plan is settled, Signor, and the thing as good as done. Why, in itself it is nought ; 'tis what comes after a man has to look to. Thrice before have I carried through just such a scheme and never heard that the day after either side found fault, but for different reasons. Twice it was in the Abruzzi, and once to the honour and profit of no less a man than—no, never mind for whom. Once done, these things are best forgotten. And yet there is something that sticks in my mind. Ah, yes ! we used fire instead of steel. It was his whim, and if the blaze be but high enough up, all men shut their eyes. By Peter and Paul, how the wretches howled !"

"No pity, Messire Tito ?"

"Pity roasts no chestnuts, Signor. Well, a short memory is God's blessing. Now as to our plans. There are three heads : the time, the men, the details ; and the first is for . . . ion, the second is

your business, and the third, Messire, by your leave I shall attend to."

"The time?" answered di Gadola, "say six days hence."

"Ha! Christmas-eve? You have a sour wit, Signor. Peace on earth and good-will to men. Agreed as to the time. The wit is as wise as the sour. 'A jesting man keeps light watch,' says the proverb. Now the men?"

"With those seven that came in a fortnight since we have enough, and that I go with you is your guarantee for that."

"Those seven? De Casera and his half-dozen? Signor, I do not like this de Casera. What the plague does a fellow with a de to his name want with five crowns a month?"

"Let de Casera be; I know his sort. 'Tis odd, but there is no more unscrupulous rogue than you, a broken gentleman; as if a man who was damned for this world cared little if he was damned for the next too. I tell you I like him the better that he flaunts his gentility. There is the more expected of him, and he must live up to his profession. Now what is this fellow? A man of the south, since Casera is a Pope's fief; therefore he knows nought of Perego, who lives in the north. Next, having won a something by his sword—and no trifle as I think—he crosses to France full and comes back empty and so has no love for the French. What then? Will he scruple to plunder France because France

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bides at Meluzza and not in Guienne? No, by the Mass, not he! My dear kinswoman is as much his foe as another. But have him in and satisfy yourself."

"I would we had tried him on some smaller devilment first, Signor. My gentleman's stomach may turn squeamish."

"Then it would have turned any time these two weeks past," answered di Gadola, with a sneer, and not sorry to get a lunge home. "I do not mix with it myself, but your hounds' society is none of the sweetest."

"The dog follows his master, Signor," replied Zucchi, giving his patron blow for blow, "but let us have in this broken wastrel, this knight of the Defaced Scutcheon! My word! that our camp scum should catch at five crowns a month is no wonder, but that a man with a de to his name should fall so——"

"Five crowns are better than pride and a tight belt," said di Gadola, striking as he spoke a small hand gong which hung upon the wall. "Ask Monsieur de Casera to join us here."

"Ask! Monsieur! By Peter and Paul but you are polite. Is the man not your hireling like the rest?"

Round upon his jackal swung di Gadola, his mouth twisted into a snarl.

"My words and thoughts are my own, Master Zucchi; learn thou to keep thy place."

And though the face of the lower scoundrel flushed and darkened, he answered never a word. The Seigneur of Casa Foscotti paid good wages, and trade was dull by reason of much competition,—so dull that not even an accomplished rascal like Tito Zucchi could afford to quarrel with his meat lest he go empty, and the silence that followed di Gadola's retort remained unbroken till de Casera made a third in strange company.

Even then the silence continued. To say to a man, "We suspect you ; are you faithful ?" was little use, since he would answer, "Yes," and leave them none the wiser whether it was truth or lie ; so for a time they stared at him, one across the chair-back as he sat astride, the other hunched forward with folded arms against the table edge. As for de Casera, he bowed slightly to the patron, then waited on him, alert but unconcerned, as a captain with a good conscience might upon his general. Of Zucchi he took no notice at all.

"Thou hast been drawing pay these fourteen days," began di Gadola at last, "but the time has almost come when we shall have work for thee ; a small command, perhaps. Therefore, we——"

"The hiring suited both you and me," broke in de Casera, "but there is no room in it for thee's and thou's. And who are we ? Are there two masters in Casa Foscotti ?"

"One lord, but two masters," said Zucchi. "What ? Seigneur, am I right ?"

"No, by the Mass, no ; thou art wrong. There is but one master at Casa Foscotti."

"Ah !" said de Casera, "I understand now. Monsieur di Gadola was long the friend of sovereign princes, and their style is infectious."

"What ? You would gibe, you would gibe ?" burst out Zucchi starting to his feet. "Signor, can you endure these insults ?"

"No insults to me, since more than Borgia, and as high as he, have called me friend ; nor do I need any man to school me in my own quarrel."

"To me, then, and for the fourth time in ten days. Had we not had Meluzza in hand—but listen to me my cock——"

"No brawling," broke in di Gadola authoritatively, "at least not for seven days ; after that !" and he shrugged his shoulders, "I care not a quattrino what you do."

"You spoke of some small command, Messire ?"

"Aye." For a moment di Gadola sat silent, gnawing his lip, then went on slowly, "You have eaten Casa Foscotti's bread and salt ?"

"True, Messire, for hire."

"Aye, but hire will not always buy faithfulness, and when it comes to a command——" Then he stopped short. "You understand ?" he added at last.

From his pouch de Casera drew five silver pieces and laid them on the table.

"Hold these till all is over," said he, "then pay me what I am worth."

"On my word you rate your faith cheaply," said Zucchi settling himself back on his stool, "but every man knows his own price. Five crowns Well! I don't dispute the valuation."

"'Tis the hire of a life."

"And the faith is worth no more than the life. It was not so we were taught in our school, but, as I say, I grant you it is full value."

"Some schooling is soon forgot," answered de Casera drily, "or it may be the memory is convenient. I go or I stay, Messire di Gadola, whichever you will, but I tell this hectoring bully to his face that I pledge myself to nothing beyond faith to faithfulness."

"And who asks more?" replied di Gadola.

But it may be that their ideals of fidelity were not alike, and that de Casera held that the murdering of women and babes in the dark smacked of the treacherous, for the next day Carlo Perego received this message: "Keep close watch, for it will come within seven days.—C."

III

To one overwrought as Denise had been the slow journey from Lhoac was a gain rather than a loss for all its attendant fatigues. Broken in nerve and driven in upon herself, the bustle and daily variety of the road acted like a cordial, and by the time

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Caterina, with a small wide-eyed Guy clinging to her skirts, welcomed her at the great door of Meluzza, there was little outward trace of the heavy strain borne by both flesh and spirit through the dragging summer.

"She is graver than of old," Caterina told her husband. "Denise was always deeper natured than I, and the years have cleared the depths so that we see them better, but had my mother not told us the story of Saint Agnes I would never have guessed it for myself."

"Deeper natured she may be," answered Carlo, taking his wife's cheeks between his hands and tilting up the chin in a fashion that bespoke practice, "but give me the shallower waters with their play of life and sunshine. Let the depths be never so clear there is always something hidden; therefore," and he kissed the mouth that waited for what it knew was coming, "see that in the babble which will come presently nothing is said of that Frenchman. Let what will be work itself out without our help, lest we blunder and get no thanks."

Babble! For all that he had married but one wife, and seen little of women for these seven years, Carlo Perego knew their ways. Grave Denise and gay Caterina had long arrears of gossip to make up, and their talk was pushed far into the night. Talk, on the one side of Meluzza and little Guy, of Carlo, and again of little Guy, of Casa Foscotti, and yet again of Guy. Whatsoever the germ of talk was,

whether the happiness that had come to her these last years, Carlo's goodness and cleverness, how he had realised Roger Patcham's prophecy and turned the seven hundred crowns into five-and-twenty hundred, or the shadow that Luigi di Gadola cast across their peace, the fruit and full development of it all was little Guy; his laughter, his tears, his strength, his weakness; until Denise asked with a smile if the love for the son had already eclipsed that for the father.

"Ah! no, no, never that," and Caterina's face softened and grew wistful as it had not done through all her changeful chatter; "their dearness is never alike, for there is this difference: of the one it is easy to talk, but the other—that—that—ah! that is the stripping bare of the heart for the world to peep at, and so a kind of profanation. Some day, dear, you will understand."

But Denise, though she held her peace, thought sorrowfully that she understood over-well already and had little left to learn. Nay, within the very hour she proved it, since when it came to gossip upon her side there were more blanks in the record of the years than her cousin dreamed of, for, though of Lhoëac she spoke at large, of Saint Agnes she said but little, and of Bordeaux nothing at all.

But the women's gossip was not the only conference carried on in Meluzza that night. Carlo Perego had much to say to Roger Patcham, to whom rather than to Denise he looked to give an

account of his stewardship. The making of Meluzza had been a man's work, and to a man only could the tale be fully told, from the first curbing of riotous waste down to the growing danger threatened from Casa Foscotti.

"This time he will spoil nothing with haste, so that for months I have seen the storm gathering, and have had leisure on my side to prepare to meet it. But now all that is done with. The coming of Mademoiselle will force a crisis."

"And the advantage lies with the rogue rather than with the honest man," answered Roger Patcham thoughtfully. "He can strike or hold his hand as he wills, and surprise is worth twenty men."

"But if the surprise is no surprise? What then?"

"Oh, ho!" and Captain Patcham roused himself. It was long since the intrigue of war had warmed his brain, but the significance of Perego's words could not be misunderstood. "You have not told me everything."

"This part of the tale goes—let me see, how long?—two months or thereabouts. Aye, it was mid-October, and, as I say, I was making ready for Messire di Gadola, but quietly; picking up a man here and a man there, leisurely, you understand, but with that leisure that goes far in a month, and amongst others there came this Guiennese. You may have heard of him over there; his name is——"

But Roger Patcham remembered his own advice at daylight. De Casera, it was clear, had kept

his own counsel, and Father Roger had no mind to be questioned lest he should compromise Denise by showing that he knew much while he said little since to a quick mind there is no innuendo so clear as a halting reticence. Therefore he broke in—

"How should I have heard of him? Guienne is no pocket parish where each man knows his neighbour's affairs better than his own. Can you trust him?—that's the point. Good faith is better than a good name."

"Trust me that I can trust him! The odd thing is that his going to Casa Foscotti is his own thought, and was only broached when we knew your coming was no more than a matter of days. He must be a bold man, for I would not give a fig for his life if Luigi di Gadola finds him out. He would hang, or worse."

"A bold man," echoed Roger Patcham, remembering Saint Agnes, and relapsing again into thought. "God send him safe out of it."

"And us, too," answered Perego; "though for all my ancient patron's hatred of me I think we have less need of the prayer. Di Gadola is as ruthless as death."

That closed the talk for that time, and though Perego's caution never slackened, there was no such parade of watchfulness as would set Denise on the rack. Luigi di Gadola was an ill neighbour she knew of old; that Piedmont, and indeed all Italy, was in a ferment she also knew, so that the setting

of sentries, the going of night-rounds, the careful keeping of arms in instant readiness, the huge troop at their heels on every day's ride, needed no explanation and called for no comment. Nor did she even note the doubled vigilance after the furtive message had come from Casa Foscotti. There were no more ridings afield after that ; but then it was hard upon Christmas, and so Caterina, the busy housewife, had an excuse ready to her hand for biding within doors. She was jealous of her fame, and must show that Meluzza came no whit behind Lhoeac at such a season !

But when, in the midst of all the gay bustle, the cheery quip and magpie chatter which attend the close of a labour that sees all ended save the pleasant toil of demolishing that which the labour has created, there came a second warning from Casa Foscotti, a warning that the blow would be struck that very night, Roger Patcham no longer hid the truth from his mistress. Whether at Meluzza or in Guienne she was Suzeraine, and over and above the consideration due to the woman was the duty owed to Lhoeac. But, like a cautious man, he told her no more than quieted his conscience, for of the danger he at first sought to make light, and of de Casera he said nothing at all until compelled ; a crossed love affair was too delicate for such handling as his.

Then followed such a conflict as had been fought out over Saint Agnes, but with a different ending.

"You take your risks, and why should not I? A woman cannot do much, but surely there is some thing."

"Doubtless di Gadola and his fellows will wear more than daggers of lath," answered Roger, his lean face never losing its cheerfulness; "and so there may be enough and too much, God knows, for a woman to do—afterwards. Bluntly Mademoiselle," he went on hastily as he saw her mouth grow set in a fashion he had learned to know, "this night's midnight Mass will have no place for women, and he who would eat his Christmas fare will need all his wit. To guard our own lives will be task enough without guarding yours too. What? do you think Messire Perego can rightly see to himself if one eye is on Madame Caterina behind the curtain there?"

"Oh!" and the hard line of the lips broke in a smile; "Caterina is an obedient wife, and will bide up the chimney if Monsieur Perego but bids her."

"And it is because you are yet no wife, that you would fling away your life and ours after it? Ah, Mademoiselle, if Monsieur de Casera were——"

"There, there, Father Roger, that will do," she cried, her cheeks growing redder than the light of the lamp warranted. "I will do as thou sayest. Thou knowest thou hast often told me that the first lesson in command is to obey. But—but," and her eyes grew troubled, "if our men, poor souls, have need of me, thou wilt——"

"Have no fear, Mademoiselle; to woman her work; and, by Saint George, Lhoeac knows you can do it well. That it may be too heavy is my one fear."

It therefore happened that when, after a batter of hoofs on the stony causeway, de Casera was admitted to the great hall, the two captains alone met him. The greeting—without surprise but grave and curt as of a man whose mind was full of anxious thought—which he gave Patcham confirmed Perego's suspicions that more than pure love for adventure had drawn him to Casa Foscotti, but Mademoiselle's name never passed between them.

"How is this?" said Perego, waiting, on his part, for no greeting, however curt. "Has the plan fallen through, or has di Gadola discovered——"

"Di Gadola has discovered nothing, but to play spy on a traitor is one thing, to stab him in the back another. I broke away in the dark, and the ten men he gave me are—the Lord knows where, but they will never see Meluzza to-night."

"A spy?" said Roger doubtfully. The thing itself had not troubled him, but the word vexed him, for he was jealous of the honour of the man who might one day be master of Lhoeac. "For a gentleman to play spy, Monsieur, is never——"

"Is never pleasant. You may spare me that. But if there had been no gentleman to play spy Meluzza would have followed the widow Tron's hut. Would that please you better, Captain Patcham?"

What? Is this wolfish Seigneur so nice a man that you must handle him with scented gloves? Believe me I have done that these ten days past which but for—— Bah! that is past, and we have enough on hand without adding ancient history! Is all ready?"

"What? are they hard behind you?"

"No, no, no; we have a full hour, or maybe more."

"Then a little ancient history may do no harm," said Perego. "We had your two messages; but how did you gain an entrance to the wolf's hold?"

"By leaving Meluzza by the south and reaching Casa Foscotti by the north with six as consummate scoundrels as ever robbed for hire. They were my vouchers, and passed me in without a question, for why should the seventh not be as the six? No pigeon would mate with such kites."

"What?" cried Roger Patcham, "you have given him six that we may have one? Strange strategy that, Monsieur de Casera!"

"Six that he would have had without me, for they were drawn to Foscotti as a whirlpool draws flotsam. But if I brought him six I took away ten, so he owes me four, Captain Patcham."

"Ten? How?"

"Why, he gave me ten to—— But all this is beside the mark. What of the defence?"

"Not so beside the mark as you think. Does di Gadola still look for a surprise?"

"Why not?"

"Plague take your thick wit, Monsieur, it was not thus at Saint Agnes. Or is it that when the quarry is far afoot the old dog hunts the best? The why not is because of you and your ten men. Does di Gadola suspect you?"

"I and mine were to lie in the woods this side of Mont Albano until midnight. But once there I sent them on by the Novara road to wait my coming at the first cross highway, and, by grace of the saints, there they will bide till all is over. Di Gadola can suspect nothing, since he comes by another road."

"What is his plan?"

"A simple one, and wise as simple—to enter quietly by the front door, as a gentleman should."

"If he can!"

"If he can governs the world, Monsieur Perego, since not even Don Desperando dare do more than he can do! In your place I would give him his whim."

"A free entrance? Never!"

"Why not? How does one catch rats?"

"Monsieur de Casera is right," said Patcham.

"What did I say?—a surprise is worth twenty men, but it must be one of onset and not of defence. Listen now; bolt, bar, and barricade to your heart's content, and what follows? Simply di Gadola loses his surprise, but we gain nothing. Poor strategy that, since it is nothing but strength against strength, with neither wit nor subtlety in it. Now what is Monsieur de Casera's plan? Oh, say nothing, Monsieur; I

see it all as I do my ten fingers. Bolt the door Christmas fashion—di Gadola will expect it, and it is reasonable ; set your watchmen in the echaugnette above the gateway, but let him be asleep : that is Christmas fashion too, and not unreasonable. Here now," and Roger Patcham swept his arm round the hall, " we have five entrances—two through doors to right and left ; two by passages there at the end, also right and left ; one down the stairway between these two last ; a curving spiral stairway, mark you, that leads to where we lie snoring above. By Saint George ! nothing could well be prettier ! What follows ? In comes di Gadola—that he will pick your lock is a thing of course, he has his smiths as well as his rustlers—in comes di Gadola and his men ; the place is blank dark but for the one half-turned-down lamp hung in the centre there. They come slowly and for quiet's sake as near tiptoe as such cattle can walk. With the doors to right and left they have nothing to do. Murder is their business, and the quarry is asleep upstairs ; plunder can come later. Di Gadola leads, since no man knows so well the ways of the house. At the first step they start to steal up the stairway, panting as creeping men do in the dark and with their muscles slacker than their nerves ; nothing shivers a man like that groping at the edge of he does not know what ! Then, out of the shadows, and from five points at once, we burst upon them with such a shout as makes the roof ring ! It is the crack of doom, no

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less ! and back they stagger into one another, dazed and silly as sheep. My word ! it is pretty, very pretty, the prettiest thing I have seen in a long life. If we don't break them the first charge we deserve to be whipped ! My congratulations, Monsieur de Casera ; it was a fine thought, a fine thought indeed."

So it was settled, but as each man went about his several business Carlo Perego shook his head and muttered to himself—

"A fine thought and a very pretty, but we have to see it done yet. And why—why did he call him de Casera these three times ?"

In a man who has set wife and child, as well as life itself, upon the issue, a belief that all things tend to the worst is not unnatural. To such a one the putting all upon a cast, the fortune of an ambush and the chance of a pitched onset, was abhorrent. Let di Gadola enter softly, but let him then burn and wreck from the very first, and what would be the end of this mad scheme ? Why, ruin ; final and complete !

So, for an hour or thereabouts—the active work of trap-baiting to catch vermin being done—Carlo Perego gnawed his heart out waiting. Leave his place by the right-hand door to turn the serious to a jest for his wife's comforting he dared not, lest the crisis come. No, if the plan miscarried his last kiss was given ; though there was this to his grim heartening : he might go first, but neither Caterina

nor Guy would be long behind him! Luigi di Gadola could be trusted to see to that for old sake's sake. So the first grate of a steel tool upon the door lock was to him the lifting of the heaviest burden a man can bear and live. With a sigh of relief he slipped his sword from its sheath and put the shadow from him. For good or for ill the issue was knit.

But Roger Patcham was no false prophet. Slowly, and without noise, the lumbering door was swung open, first one leaf then the other, and out of the black gap of the night the fleshy, full-lipped face of Tito Zucchi looked into the shadows, with the narrow, cunning eyes of the Seigneur peering at his shoulder. Slowly and softly, yet with many a tiny jangle of steel on the grey flags, jangles that rang harsh and strident by reason of the great silence, they stole across the shadows of the hall—themselves no denser than shadows—their troop following formlessly at their heels. At the stair-foot they halted a brief space even as Roger Patcham had foretold, and to the watchers the very panting of the half-held breath was sonorous in the stillness. Then they moved up the lowest arc of the spiral stairway.

The time had come. Where he stood bent above the first curve of the steps Roger Patcham straightened himself and filled his lungs twice.

"Saint Denise for Lhoeac!" he shouted at the full pitch of his voice, and racing downward two

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stairs at a stride, "Strike all, and strike home ! Forward all !"

But those below and behind had not waited for the command. With the first break of the hush came the swift scuffle of feet drowned in an answering roar. From the right hand in turned Perego, and from the left de Casera, and Patcham's shout was still stirring the dust of the roof and rumbling mid the ancient rafters when the groans and cries of the smitten rose up to echo on the discord.

In the astonishment of the surprise there was at first no defence, and so but little rattle of steel ; the tramp and rasp of feet upon the stones, the whisper of clothing edged along the wall, smothered oaths, unheeded orders, sudden shivering outcries, were the voices of the struggle. But presently above and through these came the sharper, shriller speech of sword on sword, the clang, the clash, the clatter ; and what at the first had been sheer slaying turned to a brief disordered fight fierce with the courage and terror of despair. Plan of battle there was, there could be, none. The cramped space forbade that—cramped, that is, for the jostling numbers that now thronged it, and for the business they were at.

But the fire was over-hot to last. From the very first all thought of attack was abandoned to the one purpose of forcing a retreat, nor, in the end, so wild and breathless had been the onslaught, was there much heart felt to stay the flight. Di Gadola and

his jackal had gone down in the first onset, and as for their led wolves, their power for harm was lost with their leaders.

Then it was, or a little later, when the stress was over, that Roger Patcham remembered his promise to Denise.

"Woman's work!" said he bitterly, and eyeing the terrible picture flung into vivid clearness by the light of the torches now thrust into the sconces along the wall; "devils' work first and woman's work after! Were we and they men or beasts that we so mishandled one another? The only comfort is that God knows the fray was none of our seeking, though that will be small comfort to Made-moiselle when she hears all the truth. Bring her here we cannot, for this is no sight for a woman. To bind and bandage will be bad enough without seeing the—the rest of the victory! Victory! Well, God be thanked it was di Gadola's doing and not ours."

A pitiful fruit it is the palm of victory sheds so lavishly from its boughs. There they lay, God's likeness, sprawled and hunched as they had fallen away or flung themselves in the last agony; friends and enemies, their love and their enmity alike quenched for ever in the sudden rising of the red flood-tide which had swept them so swiftly into the silence where not even the groanings of their fellows could reach them. At last, Patcham roused himself.

"Leave the doors open, but set a guard beyond, lest these wastrels return, though I think they are not such fools. Draw the curtains across this end to shut out the stairway from the womenfolk, then have the wounded into the guard-room—those, at least, who cannot keep their feet—and let the priests be sent for. They will have no white confessions to hear to-night if the whole truth be told them, and 'tis a terrible thing that a man should wait for such an hour as this to make his peace with God."

Thus it came that it was to a strange and sorrowful Christmas gathering that Denise and Caterina presently entered, to play hostess after an unwonted fashion. Lamps and flambeaux lit the gaunt room to its furthest limits, so that the very corners were as light by day. Ranged side by side down one length of the room were the uninvited and now unwilling guests, with here and there mixed through them a man of Meluzza. As yet nothing was hidden, and the staring glare laid pitilessly bare the stark horror of the night's work, a horror heightened by the groans and curses which no will of manhood could repress. Already at the further end there lay two who in spirit had gone to join their silent fellows of the hall, and by the bending of the friars—crucifix and holy oil in hand—above two more it was clear the tale was yet incomplete. Nay, it might not close even with them, for yet others lay as calm as death itself, but with life still staggering on the border-line that divides two worlds.

It was near one of these that Denise halted. He lay upon his side, his face half-hidden by one arm, while the other was flung out upon the floor, palm down and fingers crooked so that the knuckles stood out, white and bloodless. The tears had been running down her cheeks from the very threshold, and every time she tried to speak sobs choked her. The pity of it, oh ! the pity and the anguish of it, and all for one man's greed and wickedness ! But now she drew in her breath with a gasp.

"Lhoeac's ring !" she cried, pointing to the hand that was already so like the hand of death. "Who—who is that ?"

"That ?" and Caterina looked from the woman to the man and back again to the woman's face while she slipped an arm round her waist and drew her close to herself before answering. "That is Monsieur la Clazonnè, and Carlo says that by God's grace and with a woman's nursing he may live."

"No, no, no, not Giles la Clazonnè ; it is François de Casera."

"Giles François la Clazonnè, to whom the Pope gave Casera in the south, though of that Carlo knows nothing. Why, Denise, Denise, what is this ?" For Denise had sunk down upon her knees at the man's feet.

"Oh ! God ! God !" she cried through her renewed tears, "I thank Thee that it is no sin. Yes, yes, by God's grace and a woman's love and care he will

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live. Give me this, oh God, I pray Thee of Thy mercy, give me this !”

And when la Clazonnè of Casera came to himself it was to find his head resting on his wife's breast.

THE END.

The Gresham Press,

UNWIN BROTHERS,

WOKING AND LONDON.

